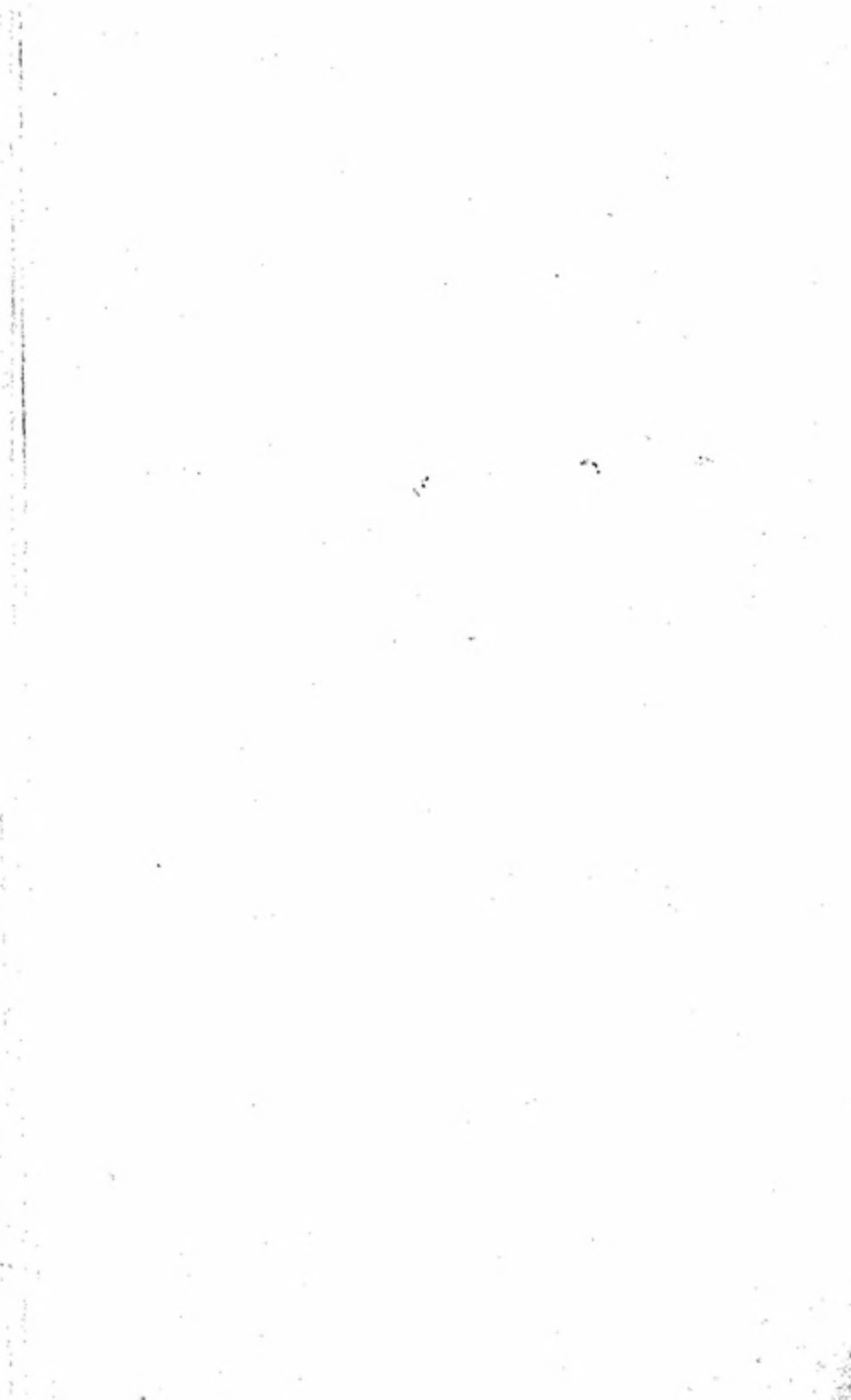


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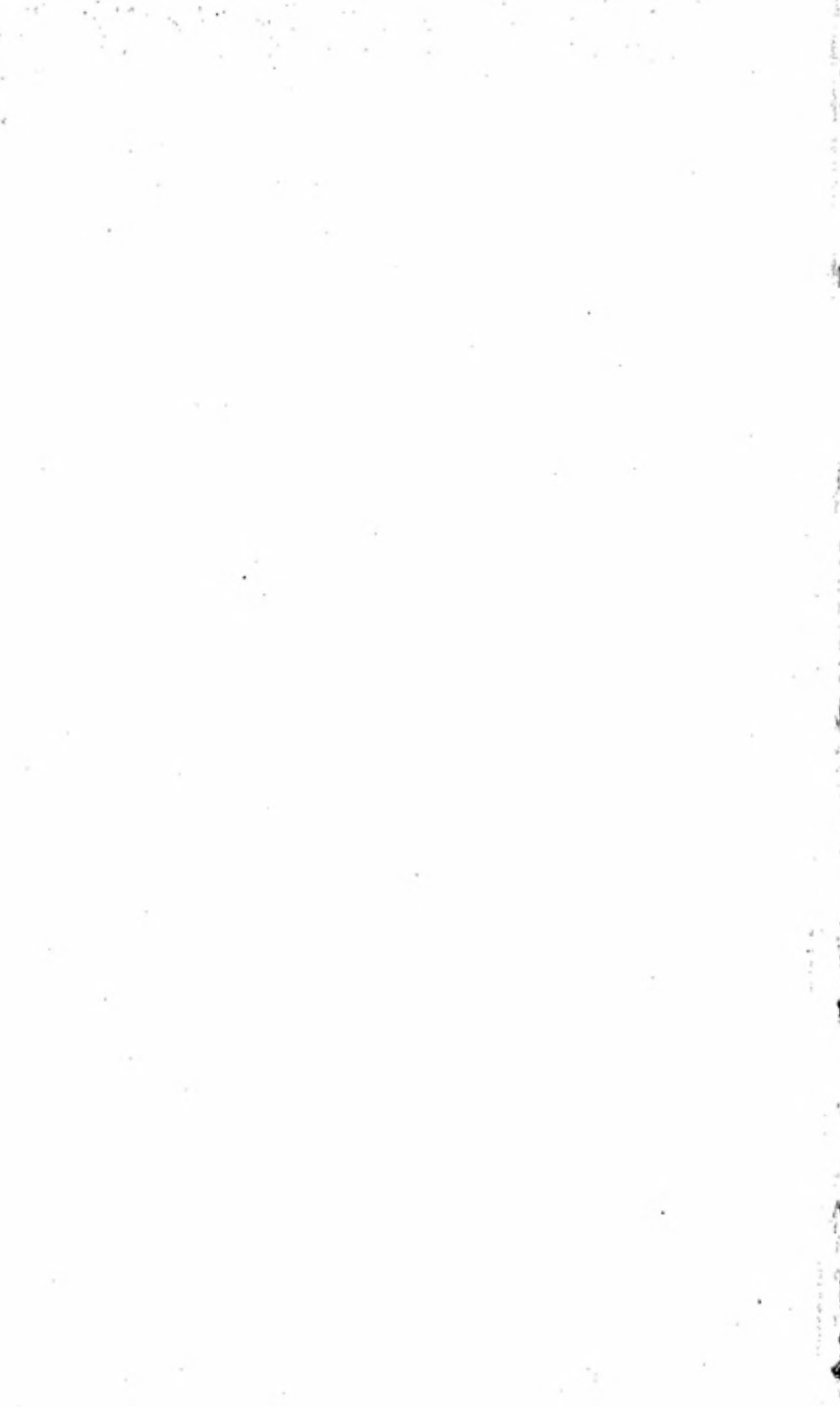
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ISLANDS OF THE MARIGOLD SUN



ISLANDS OF THE MARIGOLD SUN

by
SURESH VAIDYA
Author of Ahead Lies The Jungle

28881



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Vai

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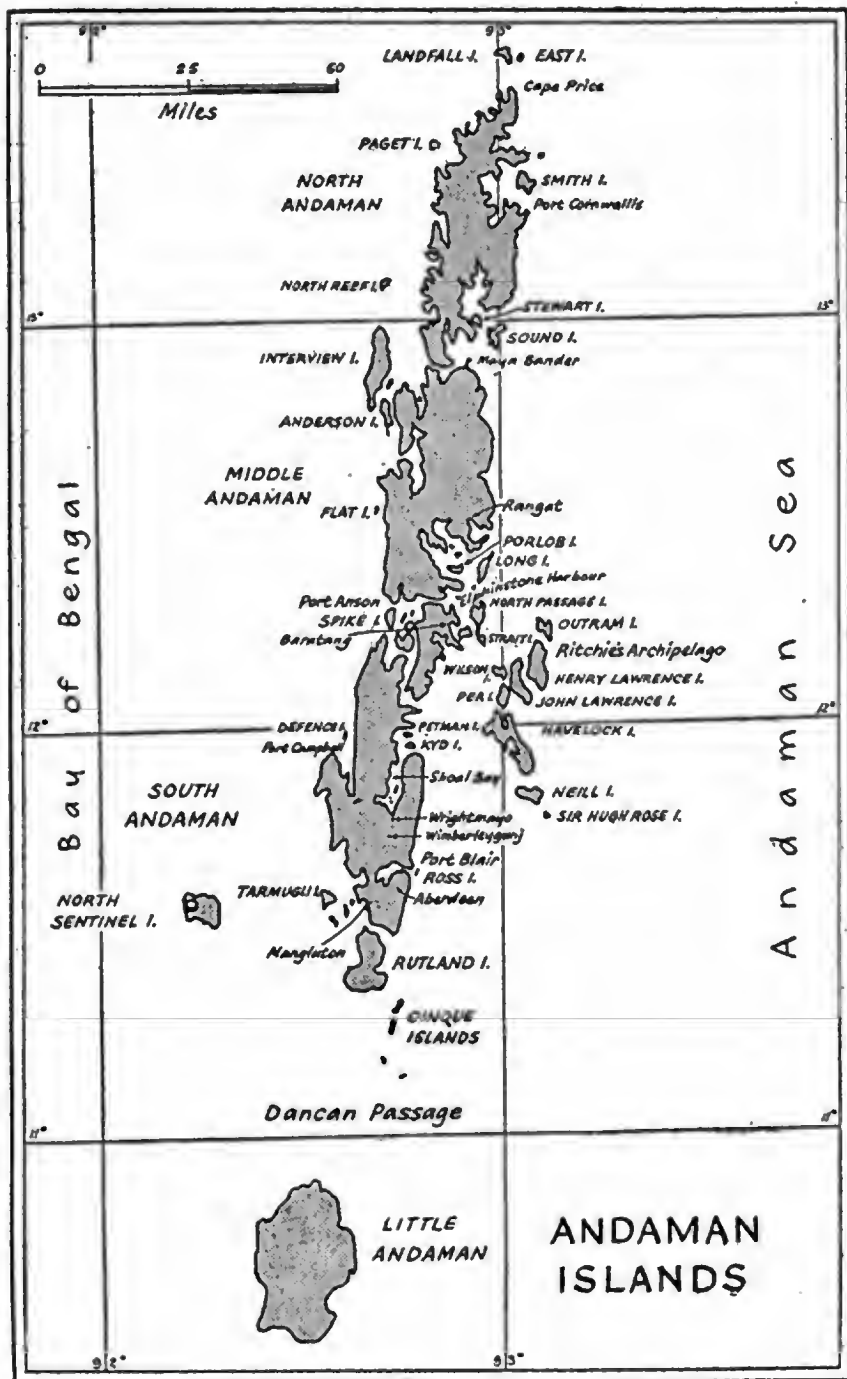
I AM grateful to Mrs. Violet Alva, Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, and the various officials in the Andaman and Nicobar Administration for all the help they gave me on the trip described in this book. In particular I am indebted to Fred Burn of the Bush Police for taking me into those formidable jungles and on the high seas, parts which I could never have visited without his assistance.

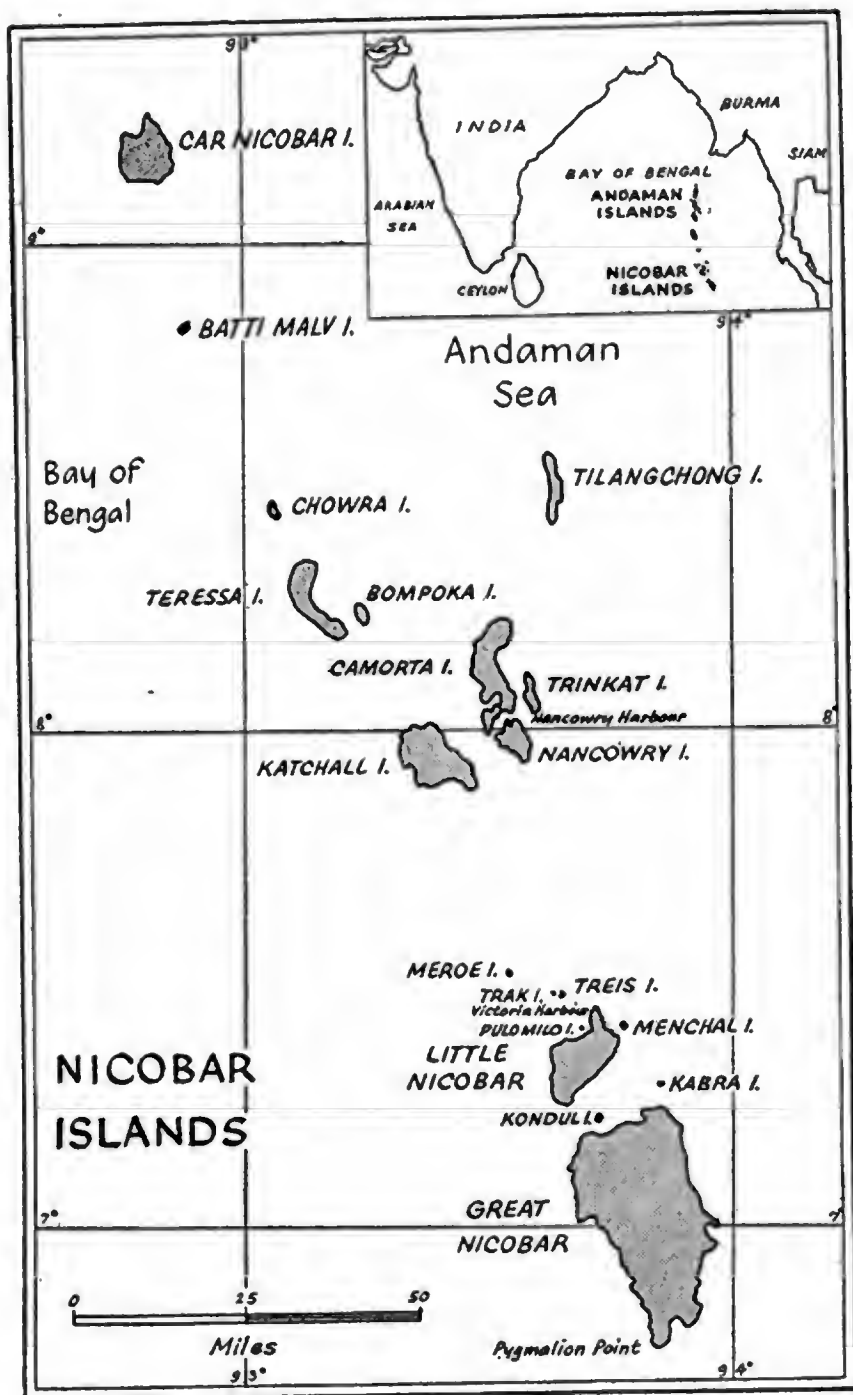
I am also indebted to Fred Burn for supplying the four photos numbered 5, 7, 8 and 9.

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CHAPTER ONE

SUNRISE

THAT night, our last on M.V. *Andamans*, sleep was difficult to come by. My cabin abutted on the upper deck, and past three o'clock, hardly two hours after we had gone to bed after a hectic ship's party, the place began to buzz with the patter of footsteps. Our five-day voyage across the Bay of Bengal, starting from Madras on a sunny March afternoon, had been monotonous, a choppy sea and characterless sky most of the time, and one could make allowance for the passengers' anxiety to set foot on shore again. But our destination, Port Blair, chief town of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, called the Bay Islands for short, was still a good four hours' run, and it was difficult to account for this disturbing hurry.

However, it was there and the bustle was constantly increasing. By and by the doors behind the partition wall of my cabin began to open and shut, and the swoosh of the showers indicated that the passengers were busy with their bath and toilet. Soon baggage was being scraped over the floor and piled up against the deck side.

A man's voice whispered, "Is this the last trunk?"

"Yes," a woman replied.

"Children still asleep?"

"Yes."

"Why not wake them up? Let's be ready so we can disembark and get home quickly."

"No. Let them sleep." The woman's voice sounded firm.

The dialogue struck me as peculiar, had the ring of irony about it. Mind you, I was the only cabin passenger going there for the first time, the others were old-timers, government servants, businessmen, merchants, even two padres. Had the Andamans, until sixteen years ago the notorious penal settlement where lifers and long-term convicts from India and

Burma were sent, so endeared itself to the people that they had begun to regard it as their home?

A child whimpered and was smacked by its mother, making it wail all the louder. Someone called out to someone else to inquire if the canteen had opened. "The canteen does not open till six," came the reply.

It was impossible to lie down any longer, the chatter and the clatter were becoming general. Throwing aside my sheet I tottered up and went out on deck. There before me was the sea, dark, full of hissing waves, the sky above holed by large, yellow stars.

"Hurrey Rama!" a thickset man leaning against the rail sighed, uttering the name of God. Swathed in a white loin cloth and a white Indian shirt in that semi-darkness he looked like an apparition. I recognized him, Govindarajalu, the businessman from Port Blair. He was standing with one foot on deck, the other on the rail, while his chin rested on a clenched fist.

"You, too, up early?" I said, joining him.

His chin still pressed upon his fist he muttered, "How can one sleep with fellahs walking, talking, dragging this thing, that thing." He sounded disgusted.

We were sailing in the 12th degree latitude but the wind was chilly and was blowing forcefully making our five thousand-ton liner rock.

"Life must be pretty lonely in the Andamans," I said casually. I had heard that the place was sparsely populated.

"It used to be when it was a penal settlement," my friend replied. "In those days everybody was a convict or belonged to the gaol or administration staff. Since the war the penal settlement has been abolished and civilians are being encouraged to immigrate. In the last eight years about ten thousand have arrived. But that is nothing. The place is big and can easily take a million."

"Why will anyone want to go there? I hear its climate is awful, especially the water." I said that because even now people on the Indian mainland call the Andamans Kalapani, or Black Water.

"People are prejudiced," my friend asserted vehemently,

then turning fully towards me to emphasize the point he was about to make, he added, "This ship we are travelling on is a good ship, isn't it? And yet stevedores in Madras call it 'kaidi-kupple'; that is, a convict ship. Why? Because it is going to the Andamans. Give a dog a bad name and hang it, that's the case with these islands."

By half-past four dawn broke making the eastern sky blush. A thin strip of clouds stretched along the horizon hiding a soft, quiet sun. Slowly the sun rose and surmounted the clouds looking like a marigold woven in a wreath. It stayed thus for quite a while, a blob of reddish orange, until all of a sudden it effulged spattering the purple sea with streaks of gold.

The water around us was still restless, but now in its waking hours it dropped its forbidding appearance. As a matter of fact it looked frolicsome as flying fish flitted about flying distances of fifty and even a hundred yards at a time. They rose four or five feet above the surface and often changed direction. Where they fell they vanished without a splash.

The deck was crowded with passengers, everyone pressing against the rail. Then suddenly on the western horizon sprang up a thick dark line which gradually transformed itself into a wooded hill, houses and gardens dotting its slopes. The ship swerved round a derelict, weedgrown island, the Ross, and entered a long deep bay bastioned on three sides by thickly wooded hills. Barges and motor launches played around us as the boat sidled towards Chatham which is Port Blair's point of disembarkation. By eight o'clock we were tied up to the wooden jetty, and the gangway was lowered.

Instantly bedlam broke out on deck, the passengers trying to get down, and black, sweating coolies clamouring to come up to carry luggage. Govindarajalu appeared out of the *mêlée* a completely changed personality in white trousers and a silk bush shirt. He shook my hand amiably, remarking, "We will meet again. Port Blair is a small town."

Down on the wharf the conditions were equally confusing, the noisy crowd milling before a row of weatherbeaten wooden shacks, while a sprawling, ungainly-looking sawmill whined and groaned in the background. The smell was distasteful too, a strong mixture of dry, rotting wood, creosote and seamuck.

There being no hotels or boarding houses in Port Blair I had written to the Chief Commissioner requesting him to find me a place to stay and I now stood looking for someone to guide me.

A tall young man with a Clark Gable moustache came cutting his way through the crowd.

"You are Mr. Vaidya?" he asked, eyeing me carefully.

I said I was.

"Good," he said. "I'm Mr. Khan from the Chief Commissioner's office. We have reserved accommodation for you at the State Guest House." He cast an interested glance at the rifles slung on my shoulders. "So you are fond of shooting," he said. "In that case you will like the Andamans. By the way," he remembered something, "have you met our Chief Conservator of Forests, Mr. Shrinivasan? He was looking for you."

I said I had. Shrinivasan was a colleague of my friend Stracey. Both belonged to the Indian Forest Service. Stracey had written to him requesting him to help me during my stay.

"Ah, good," Mr. Khan said. Then pointing to a grey pick-up, he added, "That's your car. That will take you to the guest house. Your baggage has already gone in it."

The pickup, an old army vehicle, drummed over a wooden causeway, and then raced at breakneck speed up and down a series of hills. Flame of the Forest trees lined the road, and behind them stood nice wooden bungalows, their gardens weighed down with cassias, laegerstroemia, oleanders, nariams, alamanders, and the lush green hedges were spangled with blood-red hibiscus.

The guest house was poised on the brink of a hill, its other side, wooded with drumstick trees and banana plants, sloping down to the bay below. I must say I liked the view from its veranda, hills and valley everywhere, a vast sea in front sparkling like mother-of-pearl, and above a polished sapphire sky.

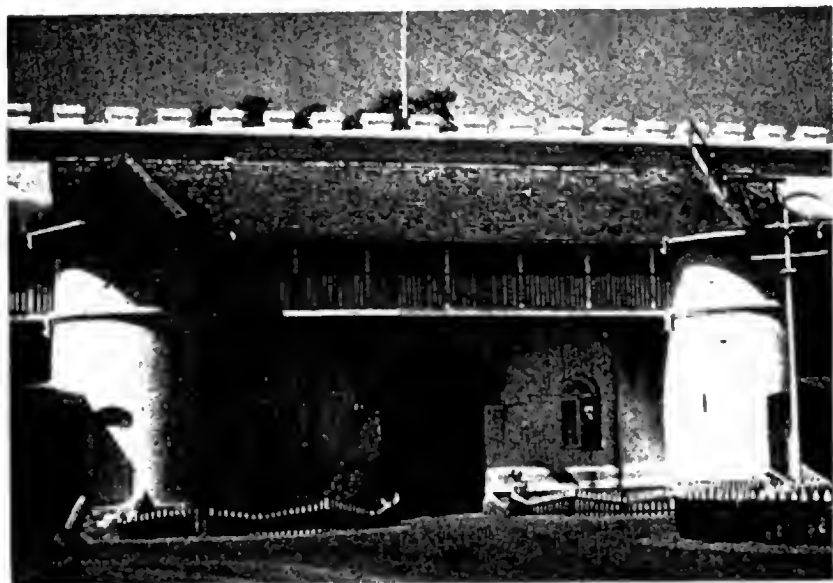
After a quick bath and a change I went to Shrinivasan's. His bungalow was a stone's throw from the guest house, but it took some doing to get up there, it was perched on the highest hill in town. However, the journey was not without its compensations, the road was lined with blossoming bougainvillea, and up on the terrace were jasmines, corals, four o'clocks and peri-



Port Blair Bay. In the foreground is Delaynepur, and in the distance the promontory with the marine jetty



Aberdeen Bazaar, Port Blair's main shopping centre



The entrance to Cellular Jail

winkles. The bungalow was made of wooden boards raised on posts, and the open space beneath was used as a garage.

Shrinivasan was a big, bluff man. "Ah! here we are," he said receiving me in his padauk wood drawing-room. "Let's have breakfast. How long do you propose to stay here?"

"Three or four months."

"That's good. Now first thing. Shift from that guest house. Come and stay here. Be my guest."

I shifted to Shrinivasan's the following day, and was glad for the change; it gave me company and homely comfort. The Chief Conservator's family had gone back to Madras for a long stay, so that we had that big spacious bungalow all to ourselves. I was given the foremost room which commanded a wonderful view of the town.

Port Blair is shaped like a square, enclosed on three-and-a-half sides by water. To the east, taking that as the base, is the Andaman Sea. At Ross Island the sea branches off into a straight long bay, which past Chatham turns south, and after some distance, turns east again, ending at Jungly Ghaut which was at the foot of our hill. From the windows of my room—and there were five—I could see all the town's localities: Aberdeen Bazaar, Phoenix Bay, Delaynepur, Haddo, Jungly Ghaut, Police Lines and so on, all connected with each other by good paved roads. After dark, when the lights came on, the town looked like a mass of glow-worms sitting in a field.

When breakfast was over Shrinivasan prepared to go to his office. "I'm sorry to leave you alone like this," he apologized, "but the bearer will look after you. Ask him for anything you want. Noor Mohammed," he called out.

A little man with mousy grey hair and a lined face answered the call. He stood meekly in a corner and murmured, "Yes, sir."

"Noor Mohammed, see that sahib has everything he wants. Make him comfortable."

"All right, sir," said the man, and withdrew.

To look at Noor Mohammed was an unimpressive fellow, but he was efficient. The following morning, hardly had my eyes opened, than he tiptoed into my room with my tea. Placing the tray on the table he whispered a "Good Morning,

sir", and proceeded to roll up the mosquito net. Then he tidied up my desk, and gathered the dirty clothes in a bag to give to the washerman.

Partridges were calling on the hill below. I listened to them attentively.

"Noor Mohammed," I said, "let's go partridge shooting one day."

The bearer shook his head. "No, sir," he said quietly. "Partridge shooting is not allowed on these islands. They are a protected bird."

"Why? There seem to be plenty around."

"People here are thoughtless, sir. Give them permission and they will shoot up every bird."

I found that Noor Mohammed was fond of birds. There were two white pigeons in Shrinivasan's house who lived in a wiremesh hutch nailed to the kitchen wall. They would roam all day in the grounds strutting about with their chests pushed forward, their tails fanned out. But in the evening they would grow temperamental and sometimes flew into the house instead of returning to their hutch. It was then Noor Mohammed's job to retrieve them. He would do that with patience and perseverance.

One evening the truant bird invaded my room, eluding Noor Mohammed by sticking close to the ceiling. Then all of a sudden it descended upon my desk perching on my camera of all things. Fearful lest the camera fall down I made a frantic dive and caught the bird by its neck, and gave it back to the bearer. He cradled the bird in his hands, stroking down the ruffled feathers, crooning soothing words. As he was going out of the room he murmured sufficiently audibly for me to hear, "Sir, you should not have caught it by its neck. Birds are frail creatures. They are easily hurt."

Noor Mohammed was gentle in every way. I never heard him bang doors or windows, nor did he dust noisily. He did not shout at the cows and goats who often poached into our grounds to eat the flowerbeds, he merely shooed them out. With people he was always cool-tempered. Once the water-carrying lorry that came up twice weekly to replenish our stock, nearly ran him over. All that Noor Mohammed did on

the occasion was to stand stiff and warn the driver, "What are you doing, man? You would have killed me. Do you want to go to gaol for manslaughter?"

Above all he was honest. Every morning when he collected my dirty clothes for the washbag he would first go through the pockets and give me any change found in them. If I happened to be out of the room at the time he would place the money on my desk. Twice I forgot my wallet under my pillow. On both occasions he returned it without a penny missing.

"You have a fine bearer," I said to Shrinivasan. "He is so honest."

"A gem of a fellow," Shrinivasan admitted proudly. "I entrust all my house-keys to him." Then looking around to make certain he was not being overheard, he added, "And do you know he is an ex-lifer? He served his term in these islands."

I was stunned. All along I had been under the impression that Noor Mohammed was the Chief Conservator's old servant whom he had brought from the mainland, and to think that he was an ex-murderer was unbelievable. What could have made such a man commit the highest crime in the land?

One day I made bold to ask: "Noor Mohammed, did you really kill somebody?"

He was wiping the window panes. Hearing me he stood motionless, and said slowly, "Why do you want to rake up my past? Isn't it best forgotten, sir?"

I felt ashamed. What right had I to pry into his past life? "You know there are many cases in which people get falsely implicated. I wondered if that had happened in your case," I said in an effort to temporize.

"No, it didn't happen like that," Noor Mohammed corrected. "There was a quarrel over some land with our neighbour. There was a fight, and I killed the man."

I asked him when he was released.

"Just before the war."

"Then why didn't you go back to your home?"

"I did, sir. But I didn't like it there. A few days after my return there was a murder committed in our district. The police immediately pounced upon me because I happened to

be a former lifer. After a lot of explaining they let me go. There and then I decided that I would go back to the Andamans as soon as I could. I came here after the war." He stopped wiping the panes and looked straight into my eyes. "You see, sir, in this place a person is not looked down upon because he was once a convict. He can get a job without trouble, he can marry, his children are not taunted, and neighbours do not shun him. Everyone treats him as an ordinary individual."

A few days after my arrival I attended the annual Police Tattoo held on the Marina, the big playground opposite Ross Straits. It was a beautiful setting for any spectacular event. As the sun went down, the lights came on making the place look gay and festive. There were marches, and races, and long jumps and high jumps, and all sorts of events, while a band in the pavilion played martial tunes. After the prize distribution the Chief Commissioner, T. G. N. Ayyar, said in his concluding speech, "I'm proud to say that our islands have practically no crime worth speaking of. Barring four or five cases of murder—all on account of family quarrels or personal disputes—not a single major crime was committed in the course of the past year, no theft, no housebreaking, no robbery with violence, or dangerous assault. That is a tribute to the peaceful and law-abiding nature of our citizens."

Was I hearing aright? Was I in a former penal settlement?

After the gathering I buttonholed Inspector Sheriff of the Crime Branch at the Andaman Club where refreshments were being served. "What accounts for lack of crime in these islands?" I asked him.

"Lack of poverty," he replied at once. "There is no unemployment here so there is no incentive to crime." He added pertinently, "Have you noticed there is not a single beggar in Port Blair?"

On the way back I dropped in at Govindarajalu's. He was seated in his shop behind an old desk, his feet stretched out on another chair. He was considered to be the islands' wealthiest contractor, but his shop gave no indication of it, it was simple like him.

"Whatever made you come to the Andamans?" I bantered,

sitting down. "Weren't there other places you could have gone to?"

"That's a long story," he said. "It was my fate to come here. That was in 1919. I was a young man then looking for a job. Someone told me there was a shop assistant's vacancy going in the Forest Co-operative Society here. I applied for it and got the job. In those days people were afraid to come here because it was a penal settlement, and I happened to be the only applicant."

"Couldn't you have got a job on the mainland?"

"I could have, but with difficulty. You see, I'm not very educated."

"It's a big step from being a shop assistant to owning a business. How did you manage that?"

"The forest officers were too busy to be bothered with the Co-operative's affairs. After a year they offered to sell me the shop. I bought it. For a hardworking man there were plenty of opportunities in those days. I made the most of them."

"Was business good?"

"Not bad."

"No thefts, no lootings?"

"Never. Not even an unpaid bill. You see, these islands never had much crime. Occasionally convicts brawled, but there was no crime as such. One reason was the Chief Commissioner had enormous powers, he could give summary sentences, even for hanging. Naturally everyone was afraid. But there was orderliness mainly because the convicts were treated fairly. They were a contented lot."

Convicts! Contented! That didn't make sense, and I expressed my surprise.

"Yes, they were contented," Govindarajalu insisted. "If you had come in those days you wouldn't have known who was a convict and who was not. They wore ordinary clothes, and were paid a monthly wage of twelve rupees which was not bad at that time. All that marked them as prisoners were their number discs. In their free time they could play games, or go out for walks, or go to the pictures. There was always a cinema house in Port Blair. A prisoner who showed good conduct for five years could bring out his family at government expense."

For that he received an extra allowance of five rupees for the wife, and two rupees for each child. Naturally they were contented. Prisoners couldn't hope for such things on the mainland."

"But surely they had to do hard labour."

"It was manual labour mostly, but you must understand that most of the prisoners belonged to the labouring classes, and this type of work was no hardship for them. Middle-class prisoners were given easier jobs, working in offices and such things. If the man was a peasant he was given a piece of land, a pair of bullocks and a homestead. Except for the new settlements that have arisen in the last eight years all the farms in South Andaman are owned by convicts or their descendants."

It was difficult for me to imagine that a penal settlement could be so liberal towards its inmates. But here was the testimony of a man who had lived in the place for more than thirty years.

"You see, people on the mainland had no idea of conditions here," Govindarajalu continued, "and that is because the government did not want them to know. They kept a strict check on the entry of civilians lest they go back and talk about it. So a kind of a dreadful mystery grew around the place."

"Didn't the prison atmosphere affect the convicts' children?"

"Why should it? They had all the things they needed. They had free education up to the high school standard. If the parents were ambitious and frugal they could send them to the mainland for university education. The brighter students were given government scholarships. There are quite a number of doctors and engineers and architects and businessmen here whose parents were former convicts. Some of them have become prosperous." He leaned over his desk and pointed at the various houses and shops in Aberdeen Bazaar now lit with electric lights. "See that?" he said, pointing to a well-furnished room with trochus shell lamps. "That's Ghulam Mohammed's office, one of our successful businessmen. He is one of them. So is the merchant next door, Subhan Ali. He is an agent for sewing machines, bicycles and all that. He also owns the biggest coconut plantation in these islands. He is very wealthy. So is Farzand Ali. See that Farzand Ali market?" He pointed at

the town's main vegetable, fish and meat market that stood behind the Clock Tower. "That was built by him for charity. All the revenue from the place goes to the local hospital."

My friend leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head and yawned. "Looking around you wouldn't think that half the population of Port Blair is made up of former convicts and their descendants, would you? Everyone is decently dressed, eats well, and lives adequately. It may surprise you to know that we have a higher standard of living here than on the mainland."

It was late, already past nine. Govindarajalu rose and waddled about the room bolting the doors of his shop preparatory to going up to his flat for a bath and supper. "So you see," he went on, rising on his toes to reach the topmost latch, groaning a "Hurrey Rama" in the process, "All this talk of Kalapani being a hell of a place is nonsense. No one was terribly unhappy here, not even in the old days."

We said good night and parted.

CHAPTER TWO

BACK OF BEYOND

A PENAL settlement is always a source of mystery, and if it happens to be on a lonely, faraway island, it becomes even more fascinating. I had been hearing of the Andamans since my childhood, and invariably in terms of horror and torture. I recall my father once mentioning it when a man he knew was sent there for committing a murder. He was said to be a victim of circumstances and my father sympathized with his plight.

"Well, he will come back after twenty years," said my grand-uncle who happened to be at our place at that time.

"What chance!" my father exclaimed incredulously. "If he survives the imprisonment—and I'm told it is pure torture—the climate is bound to get him. It is said to be very bad. And the place is a hotbed of diseases."

The way he said it one would think the Andamans were a hell on earth.

Generally speaking the average layman knew nothing about the Andaman and Nicobar group of islands. Barring two hoary volumes useful only to scientists there was no Andaman literature as such, and on the Nicobars, which lie to the south of that archipelago, I had not read even a news item. The colossal ignorance continued right until the Second World War. It was only when the Japanese occupied the islands, and the radical leader Subash Bose temporarily set up his provisional government there that the Andamans sprang into the news for a brief period. However, with the collapse of Japan and the dissolution of the provisional government, the archipelago sank back into its age-long oblivion.

I always had felt an urge to visit the Bay Islands, if for no other reason than to see for myself what sort of a place it could be if it was such a hell, but it was not until 1957 that I began to think seriously of the project. News had been appearing in the press in recent years that the islands had now been opened up for refugee settlement and that travel facilities had been made

easier. That was an added inducement. When I began to make inquiries, however, I found that the ignorance about the archipelago continued to be as colossal as before.

My first move was to look for people who had been there so I could talk to them, but I came across none. Then a reporter friend suggested that I should meet one Reverend Richardson, a Nicobari, who represented the Bay Islands in the Indian parliament. I tried to locate him, alas! in vain. The man had not attended a single session because there was no regular steamer service from his island to fetch him.

I explored another possibility, approached a prominent travel agent of New Delhi who claims to book passages to "any point on the globe by rail, sea or air". I asked the man at the counter about timings and fares to the Andamans. He looked blank.

"Which place did you say?" he kept on asking.

Since repeated explanations could not enlighten him he fetched his boss. The latter emerged from his impressive office room, spread out his hands on the counter and confessed, "We have looked up all the rail, steamship and air service guides. I do not find any mention of the Andamans."

"Maybe you will find it under Port Blair. That's where the ships call."

The two re-entered the office to re-emerge a few minutes later as blank as before. "No," the director announced. "I find no mention of Port Blair either."

A deadlock was reached. The director suggested a way out, asked me to leave my name and address. "Maybe our Bombay or Calcutta offices will know something. I'll write to you as soon as I hear from them."

He never wrote.

By now I was convinced there was no way of knowing anything about the Bay Islands and I settled down to my routine of life. One evening my wife, who works in a New Delhi hotel, brought me a surprising piece of news. "We've some Andamani people staying with us. Want to meet them?"

I thought she was pulling my leg, so bantered, "They have arrived specially for my benefit, I suppose."

"No. They are here for the Republic Day. They are the Prime Minister's guests."

"What do they look like?"

"One of them has negroid features. The others are Chinese-looking."

"Their language?"

"I don't know their language, didn't speak to them. But I know they are Andamani. Come to the hotel some time and convince yourself." I realized that she was being serious.

I met the party the following morning. The negro-looking man was said to be the chief of the Andamani tribe, while the Chinese-looking other three were Nicobari. There was a woman among them, the Rani Lachmi of Nancowry. It was lucky she could speak Hindustani fluently, for the others spoke it in a pidgin fashion. But alas! our conversation lagged just the same for the simple reason I did not know what to ask.

"How are your islands?" I said.

"They are beautiful," the woman replied. She was dressed in a sarong and a shawl, and the men wore woollen trousers and jackets, and were obviously feeling uncomfortable.

"Where is your home?" I asked the Andamani.

"My home? It's in jungle. It's in tree."

"What do you eat?"

"Pig and fruit. All grow in jungle. Turtle grow in sea. We eat turtle," the man said.

"We Nicobaris eat coconuts and fish. Also pigs and chickens," the woman chipped in.

The way they huddled together, shivering, they couldn't be liking Delhi much, not in winter anyway. Nonetheless, more as a matter of form than anything else, I asked, "How do you like Delhi?"

"It's nice," they said politely. "But we are not used to this sort of climate."

By now I had run out of questions, so inquired casually, "Your islands must be warm and sunny."

Their patriotism flared up. "Wonderful!" they exclaimed enraptured. "Why don't you visit us?" the Rani said.

The Indian official from Port Blair who had come to escort the party, was waiting for them outside. I tackled him. He was

courteous. "Is it possible for a layman like me to visit the Bay Islands?" I asked him.

"Why not?" he said. "Get the Home Ministry to recommend you, and we will do the rest."

That sounded encouraging. I wanted to ask him more about the place, but he left immediately. The party had such a crowded programme I never got an opportunity to talk to the man again. In a week they left Delhi.

I manœuvred an introduction to the Home Ministry official who deals with the Bay Islands' affairs, and told him what I wanted.

He had a spacious office in the Secretariat building, and its walls were draped with large maps of the Bay Islands.

"So you want to go to the Andamans?" he said, directing me to sit down.

"Yes, if I can."

"Why not?" the official demanded. "It's Indian territory and you are an Indian citizen. You are within your right to go there."

"What are the islands like?"

"Cannot tell you. Never been there."

"How's the climate?"

"Can't tell you that either."

I decided to come to the point. "How and where do I buy a ticket to Port Blair?"

"Tell us when you want to go and we will do it for you. We run that steamer service."

"Do I pay you the money?"

"No. The Chief Commissioner looks after that."

I could not figure out how the Home Ministry and the Chief Commissioner ran the business between them, but went on boldly, "When is the next boat?"

"You want to go by the next boat?"

"If it is possible."

The official picked up the telephone and spoke to someone in his department. He put down the receiver. "M.V. *Andamans* will leave Madras on the sixth. That's the next sailing."

"That gives me only a fortnight to prepare," I said, and

then added hastily, "However, I'll take it. What do I do next?"

"Send a telegram to the Chief Commissioner at Port Blair asking for a reservation. Mail us a copy of it and we will wire our recommendation."

"There's hardly time for his reply."

"He will wire you. Hurry up and send that telegram, do you understand?"

His last sentence was uttered in the manner of a warning that I should hurry not only with the telegram but also with myself. I tarried long enough to ask: "You have a good collection of the Bay Islands maps. Can you tell me where I can buy them?"

"Good gracious, man, you are going to the Andamans. Why don't you buy them there?"

"Oh, yes, of course I can," I apologized, then remembered. "And books? Have you any books I can read?"

The man gave a sharp twist to his swivel chair. "You are going there. The Chief Commissioner has a good library. You will have plenty of chance to read there."

I realized that it would be disastrous to tarry longer. "Good-bye," I said.

"Good-bye," the official murmured without looking up.

From the Secretariat I went directly to the post office and sent the telegram to the Chief Commissioner, and mailed a copy of it to the official. Five days later the reply came from Port Blair instructing me to pick up my ticket from a passage agent's office in Lingachetty Street in Madras.

Packing together whatever I could in the way of equipment, clothes, photographic material, camp kit, scraping together all the money I had, I trotted off to the railway station to make a reservation on the train to Madras.

The booking clerk viewed me quizzically. "Are you joking? You want a reservation for Madras at such short notice? That is a heavily trafficked line. Reservations have to be made a fortnight in advance."

That remark left me speechless. Who was to think that the line was so heavily booked? Admitted, the sixth of March was still a week away, but to be on the safe side I wanted to reach Madras a few days earlier. I was crestfallen. "My dear man, I

would not bother you, but I must be there the soonest I can. I have a boat to catch."

That softened him. He suggested an alternative. "Would you care to go on a train that leaves the day after tomorrow? Mind you," he warned, "there is no sleeping accommodation on that train."

"I'll take that," I said.

The journey involves two days and two nights, and is tiresome to endure even in a sleeper. But I had no option. Four days later I was in Madras, tired out but relieved.

I went to the passage agent in Lingachetty Street and asked for my ticket.

"Sorry, sir," the man at the counter said. "We have no intimation from Port Blair about you."

"That's impossible," I protested. "Here's the telegram from the Chief Commissioner." I produced it.

The man brushed it aside. "Maybe you have received a telegram, but we haven't. Until we do we can't book you. Please do not argue."

I returned to my hotel, fretting, fuming, cursing the Home Ministry, the Chief Commissioner, the passage agent, all with fine impartiality. My mood did not improve when the following day no news came, nor the following nor yet the following. I gave up hope. Then on the day before the ship was due to sail the passage agent rang up. "We have received instructions about you," he said. "Come and pick up your ticket."

I rushed to Lingachetty Street and offered the money. The booking clerk went through the passenger list and took my money. "Where's your health certificate?" he demanded.

"What health certificate?" That was a new one on me.

"That you have been inoculated against cholera, typhoid and smallpox. You need that to go to the Andamans."

"No one told me about it in Delhi," I grumbled.

He gently pushed the money back at me. "I cannot book you without a health certificate. Those are the regulations. Besides," he added, "you should have had the shots a fortnight ago."

I was confounded. Was ignorance about the Andamans so profound even the Home Ministry should not have known?

I pleaded, "There must be some way out. How do you expect me to cancel my arrangements? Andamans is Indian territory. I am not going abroad. Why do you insist on a health certificate?"

The man was adamant. "Go to the Port Health Officer. If he agrees I shall have no objection."

Port Health Officer! Another government servant! My heart shrank at the thought of approaching him. What else would he do except flaunt the regulations in my face and send me packing? However, there was no alternative but to importune with him.

The Port Health Officer's office was round the corner. I was there within a matter of minutes. It was noon. The man was out. His deputy received me. I told him my difficulty. He heard me and remarked, "They are particular about health certificates in the Bay Islands, and you can appreciate their viewpoint. If a big epidemic were to break out they won't have the means to cope with it. However, see the Health Officer. He may have a suggestion."

It was obvious I was hoping against hope, but I sat out that half-hour patiently.

Dr. Ayyangar, the Port Health Officer, was middle-aged, fair-skinned, with gold-rimmed glasses, and an arty mop of hair. The deputy introduced me, but at the moment he was too engrossed with the troubles of some British ship whose crew had suddenly gone down with 'flu, to bother about my business. The deputy and he discussed the affair for a long time. Then Dr. Ayyangar beckoned me. "Let me hear your problem," he said, sitting down. "A Port Health Officer's life is nothing but listening to other people's problems."

The office was a matter-of-fact affair, wooden furniture, buff paper, and on the shelves and racks behind, books and books of regulations. Dr. Ayyangar listened moodily to my story. When I had concluded, he leaned back in his chair, looked at the ceiling, and sighed. "They are particular about inoculation and vaccination, I know."

"In that case what do you want me to do? Go back to Delhi?" I was desperate.

"When is the boat leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

He leaned forward on his desk. "You see we are bound by regulations. I can assure you there are too many of them in India. By the way, what class are you travelling by?"

"Cabin."

At this his sombre face relaxed. "I told you there are regulations and regulations. But there are also escape clauses in those regulations, and you can take advantage of them. Now that I think of it there is a sub-clause that says that cabin passengers need not have the shots a fortnight in advance. But they must have them. So go to the Municipal dispensary and get the shots. Show me the certificate and I will sign your permit."

The Municipal dispensary opened at four, but I was there a good half-hour before. Gathering the certificate I hastened to the Port Health Officer, and he promptly issued my permit. With it I rushed to the passage agent's.

The booking clerk was about to close the counter, but on looking at the permit he paused. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "You got it. I have been issuing tickets for the last thirty-five years but never have I seen a health certificate granted so promptly. Where's your fare money?"

All that afternoon, and that night, and the following morning I hugged the ticket as though it were a million-pound note, apprehensive at the same time if, like its forebear, it would not prove illusory. Not until I was on the boat, not until I was safely ensconced in my cabin, not until the hawsers were thrown off and the propellers churned the murky dock waters, not until the scenes and sights of Madras were out of view, could I believe that I was really on my way.

CHAPTER THREE

A LIFERS' PRISON

SHRINIVASAN urged me to see T. G. N. Ayyar, the Chief Commissioner of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. "He is the head of the Administration, and it is common courtesy that you should call on him," he argued.

I was reluctant to do so at that stage. What could I say to him considering I did not know even what I wanted.

"I will see him later when I get the hang of the place," I countered.

It was morning. Shrinivasan was getting ready to leave for his office. "He is the best man to put you wise about conditions on these islands," he insisted. "Besides, he adores meeting visitors. You will find him an interesting man."

I rang up the Chief Commissioner's residence. Samuel, his private secretary, answered. I told him who I was and what I wanted, and to my surprise he said, "Let me go and ask the boss for an appointment. He has been expecting to see you." A moment later he was back on the line. "Can you come along at nine? Come to the residence." The tone of his voice was such that it ruled out a refusal.

Noor Mohammed summoned a taxi for me. The taxi-driver, Kanna, was young and likeable, but inclined to rashness. We went up and down a series of hillsides, rushing over the road at incredible speed. Frankly, I felt nervous. But not Kanna, he was in his element, enjoying the drive like a child as we overtook cars as in a race, rounded corners on two wheels and made circles around pedestrians.

"Kanna," I said, "which State do you come from?" His origin had been puzzling me, for he spoke Hindustani with the fluency of a north Indian, but had the swarthy skin of a man from the south.

"What did you say, sir?" he asked, confused.

"What part of India do you come from?" I repeated.



The mobile rice hulling mill we came across on the way to Dadoo Lal's farm



Constance Bay outpost. I examine an imperial pigeon shot by Hla Din



Raintrees line the Colinpur Road from Port Blair. I made Sergeant Hla Din stand in its fork to indicate the enormous size of this tree which is not yet fully grown



Refugee settler and his son at Tirur leading their pair of bullocks into the field for ploughing

"This part, sir, the Andamans. I was born here."

"And your parents?"

"They were born here, too. My grandfather was brought here as a convict, but I don't know which part he came from." The guileless manner in which he referred to his forebear was touching.

I wondered why a bright young fellow like him was not attracted by more lucrative prospects on the mainland. "Aren't you curious to go to some big city and see what it is like? You might get a better job. There are always opportunities for able chaps like you."

Kanna took a sharp, screeching turn. "I have been twice to Calcutta," he said, righting the steering, "but I don't like it there. The noise drives me mad." He added, "Don't you like the Andamans, sir? I would rather earn a hundred rupees here than twice that on the mainland."

Beyond the Secretariat Hill came the officers' bungalows, their big gardens packed with flowering shrubs and plants. In the wood that followed raintrees clustered thickly, their foliage rouged with springtime blossoms. Beyond the wood appeared a glade where the taxi slowed down, for we were approaching the Chief Commissioner's residence. At the gate Kanna braked for a fraction of a second, leaned out of the window, and shouted, "All right," to the armed sentry. The latter motioned us to carry on without stepping down from his cubicle. Thereafter we drove through a parkland throbbing with pink cassias until the taxi halted at the broad white porch forming the entrance to the Chief Commissioner's palatial residence.

I gave Kanna the fare money plus a tip. The man returned the tip, remarking, "We don't accept tips in the Andamans, sir."

What an independent fellow, I thought.

I climbed up the wide stone steps flanked with pots of roses and petunias and went into Samuel's office. "Mr. Vaidya?" he said, shaking my hand, and briskly exited from the room. A moment later he was back beckoning me to follow him.

Ayyar sat behind a vast desk, a middle-aged man of finely chiselled features. His office was a long room on the other side

of the vestibule, several windows and a wide open door looking out on to a garden. On seeing me he rose, shook hands, and put down his glasses on the blotting pad behind an expensive cut-glass inkpot. He viewed me coldly for a while, as though to measure me up. Then the sternness on his face dropped like a mask.

"Imagine that! Imagine that! A writer has actually come to visit us," he said with mock surprise. "I thought you on the mainland considered us backwoodsmen." For a moment he fiddled with his glasses.

Emboldened, I confessed, "I know nothing whatever about these islands. I am relying on you to help me." And before I had time to complete my sentence the Chief Commissioner burst out:

"Dear man, who does? Even we who are stationed here know so little. These islands are a closed book. No one cares to come here and study them, so no one knows. We don't even know the local languages." He fished a piece of paper out of a drawer of his desk, and held it under my nose. Some strange-looking words were written on it. "Know what that is?" he asked. "Nicobari words. I am trying to learn Nicobari. One day I hope to compile its vocabulary." He withdrew the paper and shoved it back into the drawer.

He went on: "For a century this archipelago was curtailed off because it happened to be a penal settlement. Before that few dared to come here because of the hostility of the local tribes. Since the Indian Government took over ten years ago we are trying to develop it as a free colony, but our progress is slow because we had to start from scratch. Previous to our coming only a portion of South Andaman had been cleared, and that strictly for the penal settlement. Now we are trying to clear the other islands, and they are overrun with forests."

"How are the tribes reacting to your settlement schemes?" I inquired. "Are they still hostile?"

The Chief Commissioner leaned back in his chair and looked pensive. "That's a moot question," he observed after a pause. "Briefly it is like this. There are three tribes in all. The smallest are the Andamani. Only about thirty of them survive, they are dying out. They are friendly and mix with us. The

Onghies, the other tribe, number about three hundred. They are not hostile, but nor do they mix with us; they keep to themselves on their island. The dangerous ones are the Jarwas. They live on the west coast. We have had plenty of trouble from them. They raid our settlements. They are savage and cruel."

"Have you encroached upon their land by any chance?" I asked.

"What land?" the Chief Commissioner asked. "No tribe had any fixed territory here. They wandered over all the islands. They are nomads. We have cut out a big reserve for the Jarwas, and considering they are only a few hundreds it should be enough. They are hunters and their reserve is well stocked with animals. No, they are human-haters. Not only we but the other two tribes go in fear of them. We have to maintain a special police force to keep them in check."

"If they are troublesome why don't you do away with them?"

The Chief Commissioner looked askance at me. "We can wipe them out easily enough. But would it be human? Would it be civilized? No," he affirmed. "We don't want to exterminate them. On the contrary we want to protect them, befriend them if possible. We are doing that in our own way and suffering for it. But never mind, one day we will succeed." He sounded like a missionary.

At this point screams and shouts arose from the garden, and the next minute a little boy scampered through the open door with a servant in hot pursuit. The boy, dressed in clean rompers and a natty blouse, dashed to the chair next to mine, and the next second was up on the desk shouting, "I want that," meaning the Chief Commissioner's glasses.

The Chief Commissioner seized his glasses and quickly dropped them into a drawer. Then he turned on the servant. "Ram Singh, why don't you take him out? Don't you see I have a visitor?"

"He won't listen," the servant pleaded meekly.

"Take him, take him away."

The dialogue had no effect upon the child's screamings. "Where are the glasses. You stole them," he cried, sprawling all over the desk, nearly upsetting the inkpot. Only when the

Chief Commissioner tossed out a pair from another drawer did the howling stop.

"Now, Ram Singh," Ayyar said sternly. "Go and play somewhere."

When the two had gone, Ayyar winked at me and said, "That boy is always after my glasses. That's a cheap pair I gave him. I cheat him with it."

"Your grandson?" I said.

"No, my son, Pralhad. Being the youngest I spoil him."

Our conversation now turned to another topic. "What about the convict colony? Any convicts left?" I inquired.

"Most have gone back," said Ayyar, comfortably settling down in his chair. "There are some still here, but officially we know nothing about their existence. During their occupation the Japanese not only freed all the prisoners, they burnt the prison records. So we don't know who is an old convict and who is not. You will have to find that out for yourself."

"And the prison?"

"The prison still exists."

"I would like to see it."

"What do you want to see the prison for? It is an old dilapidated building. We are using most of it as a warehouse. We are thinking of pulling it down."

I insisted on seeing it. "You must understand that it was very notorious once, as notorious as the Devil's Island."

"All right," Ayyar said. "Siddu will issue the permit for you. He is our Deputy Commissioner." He lifted up the telephone receiver and tried to contact Siddu, but the latter was out. Turning to me Ayyar said, "How long do you propose to stay here?"

"A few months," I said vaguely.

"That's good. Then you have a chance of seeing something. Most visitors get fed up in a few days and go back."

The garden was agog with screams and shouts again, and the little boy ran in for a second time with Ram Singh at his heels. He climbed up on the desk with his usual alacrity, and hurling the glasses at his father, bawled, "That's the false pair. I want the real ones." His howls were so loud and naughty, any other father would have spanked him. But the Chief Commis-

sioner was at the servant once more. "Ram Singh, why don't you take him away? How can I do my work?"

Ram Singh made a vain attempt to retrieve the boy, only to be dodged and growled at. "He is so quick," the servant confessed miserably.

The howls were making the room a perfect bedlam. Desperately Ayyar lifted up the inkpot and together with a penholder offered it to the boy. The articles were gleefully accepted and the boy strutted out. On reaching the door, however, he remembered something, stopped, and looking back, bawled imperiously, "Paper, paper."

At once Ayyar leaned forward and handed him a sheet. "Go now," he said. "Go out in the garden and do some writing."

The servant was aghast. "You shouldn't have given him that," he protested. "He has just had his bath and I have changed his clothes."

The master was adamant. "Change them again if he spoils them. But go." Then turning to me, and sinking into his chair with a sigh, "Now we can have some peace."

Alas! peace there was not to be. We had hardly had time to breathe when the telephone rang. Siddu was on the line. Ayyar picked up the receiver. "Good morning, Siddu . . . you know Mr. Vaidya . . . Suresh Vaidya, yes, yes, the same man . . . he wants to see the prison . . . can you issue him a permit . . . what? . . . of course, of course . . . whenever you can arrange it . . . certainly. I'll send him along. . . ."

"Do you know Siddu's office?" the Chief Commissioner said, putting down the receiver. "Go back the same way you came. When you come to the next hill, the first building on your left is Siddu's office. It should be simple to find it. Or shall I drop you?"

"Oh, no, thank you. I will find my way," I said, rising, taking leave of a lively and infectious personality.

The Deputy Commissioner's office, a rambling old building, was like most houses in Port Blair, raised on posts, the space beneath used as a car park. A wooden stairway terminated in front of the Revenue Department office. The Deputy Commissioner's chamber was at the farthest end, connected by an

open veranda abutting on to the spacious court-room. The court was not in session yet, but the public benches were occupied, and the prisoners, five young men casually dressed, stood dejectedly in the dock.

"What's the case about?" I asked a stoutish man in white trousers and a black alpaca jacket who was poring over some papers.

"Murder," he said, looking up.

"Murder!" I ejaculated.

"Yes, murder," the man laughed. "A typical Andaman murder. Seen the murder weapons?" he said, pointing at a bundle of bamboo sticks and a small pounding stone lying on the floor. "Those are the exhibits. That's what the murder was committed with. Murder!" he laughed derisively. "The law cannot convict on such flimsy evidence. At its worst it can be called a case of manslaughter, but not murder. Murder presupposes premeditation. Do these exhibits suggest premeditation?" He stared at me awhile for effect, then carried on, "None of the lads will be hanged, I can assure you. I am defending them."

The Chief Commissioner's words uttered at the annual Police Tattoo were still fresh in my mind. "What accounts for the scarcity of crime on these islands?" I asked.

The lawyer's countenance became grave. "Don't ask me why people don't commit crimes. But I can tell you why they do. Climate. This enervating climate that frays tempers and incenses people." Then suddenly to me, "By the way, who are you? A newcomer? I haven't seen you before."

I told him.

"Ah, ah!" the lawyer ejaculated. "You sound an interesting fellow. Come and see me some time. My name is Devasia, P. T. Devasia."

An attendant murmured behind me that the Deputy Commissioner was now free.

I followed him to a small airy room where Siddu was dictating to his secretary. He paused, put down a sheaf of papers, and smiled through a luxuriant Sikh beard. Young, I thought, to be the second in command of these islands.

"Forgive me if I'm brief," he apologized, neatly arranging

his boat-shaped turban. "I will soon have to go to preside over the court. However . . ."

"Mr. Ayyar must have told you what I've come for," I chipped in.

"Yes, he did. You can certainly visit our gaol and take photographs. I have already spoken to the Senior Medical Officer, and he has fixed up for ten tomorrow." Then looking me up and down, "How do you like the Andamans?"

"What little I've seen so far appeals to me."

"Aren't they beautiful? I haven't been long here myself, posted only four months ago, but I love the place. By the way, the Chief Commissioner tells me you like swimming. Why don't you come along tomorrow morning? We are going to Corbyn's Cove." Then making to depart, "Now I must go."

At Siddu's place the following morning I realized that it was going to be a party. Not only were his wife and little boy dressed for an outing, there were Sandall, the Harbour Master and his wife and daughter, and Kaikobad, the master of *M.V. Nicobar*, which was lying in harbour. We climbed into Sandall's pickup and drove out.

Corbyn's Cove lay behind a fringe of coconut palms, a small, semicircular bay banked by yellow sand. The calm water, as we splashed into it, felt warm to the touch, and was so clear the sand beneath could be seen speckled with empty shells.

Siddu's wife, a bright little thing, and Mrs. Sandall, were good swimmers, and easily outpaced us males in the little race we held with Kaikobad as the finishing point. Although I was the last to arrive I enjoyed the effort hugely, for we were the only party present, and the privacy engendered a spirit of abandon. After we had splashed about enough, Sandall said:

"Since you are fond of swimming join us when you like."

"Do you come here often?" I inquired.

"Quite often," Mrs. Siddu replied. "My husband and I love swimming."

Frankly I appreciated the cordiality with which I was being received by these officials. Most of them were here on deputation from their parent States and were apparently making the most of their opportunity.

"What made you choose to come to these islands?" I asked Siddu.

He was enjoying himself like a child, splashing about, purposely barging into other swimmers to make their lives miserable, and the climax of his joy was reached when he dived and brought up a worthless shell or two and held them up for us to admire. Beaming merrily through his soaked beard, and dropping a shell to sink, he warbled, "What made me choose to come to the Andamans? Love of sport, I suppose. There is a considerable amount of shooting here. I adore shooting."

For a lover of outdoor life the place was enchanting. What a sun, so bright and brilliant! What greenery, so lush and pleasing! What lovely birds, and how beautifully they sang. And what cool, sedative breeze! How strange, I thought, that the British should have chosen to convert this beautiful place into a penal settlement.

By the time we had had our breakfast snacks, it was half-past nine. We packed up and drove back to Siddu's for coffee. There the telephone rang. Coming over, Siddu said, "That was Kapoor, our Senior Medical Officer. He says he is waiting for you at the gaol."

Sandall took me over in his rickety old pickup, a relic of the last war left behind by the Japanese. Apart from the discomfort of its springless seats, the vehicle had the nasty habit of giving out in the middle of running and the Harbour Master had to use all his pedal power to make it go again.

The road ran, as usual, over ups and downs, amidst an avenue of stately raintrees, their buttressed roots spreading out like ducks' webbed feet. Every time we passed a locality, knots of wooden dwellings sprinkled with humanity and domestic animals, we had to slow down for flocks of chickens fed unconcernedly in the middle of the road. How Sandall cursed them. At one place, exasperated, he purposely drove through the brood crushing a chick, muttering, "Serves them right," with vengeful delight.

Past the crowded Aberdeen Bazaar, up the gentle slope of the promontory, we motored through the main gate of the Cellular gaol overlooking the Marina and arrived at the

barred entrance of the wing that constitutes the present prison. A khaki-uniformed guard unlocked the door. I got down, took Sandall's leave and entered. As I stood shaking hands with Kapoor, the Senior Medical Officer, and Phatak, the gaoler, the door behind me locked.

Kapoor led me into his office, a sexagonal room furnished with worn-out wooden chairs, and an equally ancient desk. A shaft of light entered from a ceiling window and was so dazzling I wondered how I was going to do my photography. "I think we should go over the prison before the light gets too strong," I said.

Kapoor had just sat down in his chair, but rose instantly. "That's what we thought," he said. He was a portly man with a cherubic face, and made a conspicuous contrast with Phatak's grim, gaunt figure. The gaoler too agreed, but for a different reason. "Yes, we should go over the prison first," he said, "for in another hour it will be the prisoners' mealtime, and we mustn't disturb them then."

I suggested that seeing one wing would be enough, since the wings of a prison are usually alike, and then asked out of curiosity, "By the way, why is it called Cellular Gaol? Any special reason for it?" I wondered if any sinister connotation attached to the term.

"Because it has cells," Kapoor answered simply.

Noticing my confusion, Phatak, who is a career gaol officer, remarked, "In India we follow the dormitory system, that is batches of prisoners live and work together. In a cellular gaol association is permitted only during working hours. The rest of the time the convict spends in his cell."

Two guards escorted us, Lachman Singh and Girija Dayal, both old employees who knew the place and its history well. That was an advantage as both Kapoor and Phatak had arrived long after the penal settlement had closed down. We went to the unoccupied wing on the left, a long row of cells behind a wide, barred veranda. The empty cells looked neat and tidy, but the bars, and in particular the giant latches, their handles in square niches for equally big locks to go in, were frightening.

"This was where the fresh arrival spent his first six months,"

Lachman Singh explained, opening a cell door to show us. He was a lean man with a pinched, expressionless face.

I looked in. It was a narrow room with a ceiling window at the back, but the floor and walls were bare. "And what did each cell have by way of furniture?" I asked.

"Nothing, only two blankets for the convict to sleep in," Lachman Singh said, closing the door. He went on, "The convict spent half his time here. He was locked up at four o'clock and was not unlocked until four the following morning. An hour later he started his day's work which did not finish until four o'clock in the afternoon."

Four jungle mynahs calling to each other at the farthest end of the veranda took off on seeing us approach and flew merrily through the bars to go and perch on the opposite roof. How in the old days convicts must have envied the birds the way they made light of the bars!

In the triangular yard below, enclosed by the two wings, was a trellised shed surmounted by a sloping roof of corrugated iron sheeting, its interior dark and dusty. "That's where the convicts worked," Lachman Singh went on. "It contained the oil press. Have you heard of the oil press?"

I said I hadn't.

"Haven't you?" Phatak said, surprised. "It used to figure quite prominently in our newspapers in the old days. It was a horrible thing. It was like any other Indian oil press, except that instead of bullocks convicts used to pull it."

"Prisoners would faint out of exhaustion," Lachman Singh went on. "But they weren't taken off for that. Not at all. We warders used to sprinkle water on their faces, and when they revived they had to start pulling again. New prisoners fainted as many as ten times in a morning, but every time they were revived and yoked. Whatever happened a convict had to produce his daily quota of oil. If there was even a drop less there would be additional punishment. It was a terrible thing, I tell you. Even tough convicts trembled at the mention of the word oil press."

"At the end of six months the convict must have become a physical wreck," I said.

"No, the oil press lasted for only three months," the guard

corrected. "After that he was given the task of shelling coconuts. That too was a terrible job, the husk would cut into his palms and make them bleed. Life was really hard in this prison, but then it had to be, only the most dangerous criminals were sent here, and they had to be disciplined."

"What happened after the six months?"

"The convict was transferred to the barracks. All these—Haddo, Jungly Ghaut, Delaynepur—which are known as localities today, were formerly prisoners' barracks. Mind you, the work they were given in the barracks was also hard; building roads, digging trenches, clearing creeks and so on, but it was outdoor work. But between four and eight o'clock at night, when the convict had to report to his barracks, he was free to do what he liked. For a convict that was quite a privilege."

We had seen practically all there was to of the cells, and so went up the old rickety staircase to the watchtower on the third floor. Its timber had cracked in many places and the wainscoting was falling to pieces. The place had been built at the turn of the century and had been through considerable use. I was told it used to hold two thousands convicts at a time.

The view from the watchtower, open on all sides, was impressive. The prison looked like a mammoth starfish come out of the sea to take the sun, its red tentacles flung out in seven separate directions. How terrible to be confined here, I thought, with an eternal sea on the one side and a terrible forest on the other!

"I don't suppose anyone ever tried to escape?" I said.

"Prisoners used to run away and hide in the jungle, but they were invariably caught," Lachman Singh answered. "Often enough they used to surrender of their own accord for the Jar was harassed them in the jungles. More than escapes it was the riots we used to fear most. They generally broke out at four o'clock in the morning after the cells had been unlocked and for an hour the convicts would run amok destroying prison property and attacking guards. However, when daylight came everything would become miraculously quiet for no one wanted to be caught out rioting. Once the riot lasted two full days. That was the work of political prisoners. See that wing?"

he said. "That's where they used to be confined. They were always kept separate from the ordinary convicts."

"Why did it last so long?"

"Because we were not allowed to use firearms. The authorities were afraid of dealing roughly with them. After all they were educated men, and had many supporters on the mainland."

"What sort of life did they lead?"

"They were treated better than ordinary convicts. Their cells were furnished, they had a library, they played games, ate decent food, and ordinary convicts waited on them."

"And what sort of work did they have to do?"

"They didn't have to do any work."

The prison was surrounded by a high wall. Beyond the political prisoners' wing it had crumbled down to a good length, and I inquired if that had happened in the course of the riot.

"No, the Japanese pulled it down," Lachman Singh explained. "Their small boats used to touch the shore there, and they pulled it down to make a short cut."

"Were you here when the Japanese came?" I asked.

"He was the first man they tackled. Ask him," remarked Kapoor, who had been listening to the guard's story as eagerly as I.

At this point Phatak intervened. "Don't you think we should go down to the office to talk?" he said, consulting his watch.

We went downstairs. The gaoler brought me a glass of water which was welcome considering it was getting near noon and pretty warm.

"We were in a helpless position during the war because the British had withdrawn the only company of soldiers they used to maintain on these islands," Lachman Singh continued. "When Japan entered the war practically all the officials left leaving only a skeleton gaol staff to manage the settlement. It happened at five o'clock one morning. I was on sentry duty and had just stepped out to open the main prison gate when, as I touched the latch, a hand clasped my wrist from behind. I did not resist for I feared it must be the Japanese—

for some days past we had been hearing that Japanese boats were hovering around these islands. And I was right. When I turned around I found myself facing a platoon of Japanese soldiers. Two Japanese searched me and after depriving me of my baton, belt and whistle, tied up my hands. 'Who else is in?' their sergeant asked and I said the gaoler was inside. At that some soldiers went in and fetched the gaoler and tied him up. After a time they brought the Chief Commissioner from his bungalow and tied him up too. Then the soldiers entered the prison and searched every nook and corner for hidden arms. After two days, having satisfied themselves that there were none, they opened the prison gate and let out the prisoners. There were two hundred of them at the time."

"How did the prisoners feel?"

"They were happy I suppose. But they had nothing to eat. So they started looting."

"And did the Japanese look on?"

"Scarcely. They were strict disciplinarians. The prisoners were warned to stop stealing and looting, but since they took no notice, the Japs fired on them killing several. They tied up a corpse to a roadside tree and let it rot there, a wooden board with the words 'I STOLE' nailed to its chest. That had instantaneous effect; the looting stopped at once."

"Were the prisoners put back in their cells?"

"No, they had been freed for good. However, they had to work in the labour gangs, and the work there was equally hard if not harder."

"And the prison was never occupied again?"

Lachman Singh looked knowingly at Girija Dayal, and the two guards winked at each other. "It was occupied again all right," he said.

The other guard, who had been silent so far, now took up the narration. "It was occupied by a new type of prisoner," he said. "Persons suspected of spying for the British. Every time Japanese ships called here British bombers used to come over and bomb them. The Japanese suspected that the local population was supplying them the information."

"And he was one of the new prisoners." Lachman Singh laughed.

"Were you? And how did it feel like being on the other side of the bars?"

"Horrible," Girija Dayal assured. He was a fattish man with a round, expressive face.

"Lots of hard work?"

"Lots of torture," the guard corrected. "Look at these." He held out his hands for me to inspect. They were some sight. The fingers were gnarled, and the disfigured nails were growing into bubbly lumps. "They put burning needles under them. They also burnt our legs." He pushed down his hose and showed large patches of glossy skin where no hair grew. "They would light a piece of paper and hold the leg over it until the skin sizzled and one could smell the burning flesh. I was in for three months. That put thirty years on me."

"What made them suspect you of spying?"

"I was not the only one. Most literate Indians were suspected and had to suffer. The Japs believed that only fellows with some education would have the intelligence to spy. Those four years of Japanese occupation were like a nightmare. What a relief it was when they went."

At this point Phatak, who had begun to exhibit signs of restlessness, interrupted. "If you want to look at our present gaol, we had better hurry. There is only ten minutes left for the prisoners' mealtime."

We rose.

Only one wing was used to house the present inmates. There were about two dozen convicts in their regulation uniform of white shorts, long shirts, and red caps, lined up in front of a blackboard under a shed in the prison yard. Apparently they had just finished a lesson on good citizenship, for the questions on the blackboard (which I suppose they were expected to answer) read: "What are the things a citizen should not do?" "Why should one obey citizenship rules?" and so on.

"What are they in for?" I asked Phatak.

"Minor crimes mostly," the gaoler replied, "illicit distillation, poaching and so on. But now and again we also get dangerous criminals."

He led us to the row of cells in the wing. At this hour of the day the cells were empty. In one, however, we came upon a

shrivelled old man with milk-white hair. Seeing us he stepped forward, pressed against the bars, folded his hands, and kept his head down as though in prayer. He looked so miserable and meek, I could not help remarking, "What's he done?"

I must have sounded compassionate, for Kapoor broke in, "Don't you waste your sympathy on him. He is a sadistic monster. He kills children. He was sent to these islands from the mainland because he hacked up his little nephew after a quarrel. On release he was given a farm because he comes from peasant stock. But instead of living peacefully he picked a quarrel with a neighbouring farmer and hacked his little boy to bits. Now he is doing another life sentence."

"Why is he in the cell, and not with the other prisoners?"

"He is pretending to be insane, so we have locked him up to keep him under observation."

From the adjoining cell a youngish man with close-cropped hair had been furtively gazing at us through the bars, but seeing us approach, quickly withdrew behind the wall, just craning his neck forward to keep us in view.

"Another dangerous lifer?" I queried.

"He is a lunatic with dangerous tendencies. Since we have no lunatic asylum on these islands we keep him in this prison," Kapoor said.

It was time to leave, for the convicts were dutifully picking up their aluminium plates and mugs from the floor and getting ready to march to the cook-house.

Back in the office I thanked the Senior Medical Officer, the gaoler and the two guards for showing me round and took leave of them. Lachman Singh let me out of the barred entrance giving a military salute as a parting gesture.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM GALLOWS TO RICHES

I REGRETTED having dismissed the taxi so hastily that afternoon, for I found myself stranded at Chatham at very nearly four o'clock when in another hour or so I had an appointment to keep with Govindarajalu at the Marina for the opening of the islands' agricultural exhibition.

Shrinivasan, whom I had been to see, and in whose station-wagon I had hoped to ride back, apologized, "This labour dispute cropped up quite unexpectedly, and will keep me tied up for at least an hour. I suggest that you ring up the taxi-stand." But that suggestion was futile for the stand had already told me that all their vehicles were out and were not likely to return for some time. While I was pondering on what to do next—for I shrank back at the thought of footing those three miles back to our bungalow—Shrinivasan's secretary recommended that I should try to hitch-hike in a passing car at Haddo which was just over the causeway. "Motorists here are used to giving people lifts," he explained. I acted on his advice for lack of an alternative.

The causeway began immediately outside the sawmill gate, a wonderful natural aquarium over which I could not help tarrying for a few moments. The incoming tide was making circles around its log pillars, and below the "Fishing and Bathing Prohibited" board nailed to the railing, a glittering shoal of sardines was sporting merrily. The glitter turned to a flash when a horse mackerel came around, followed by a troop of tiger fish, these latter moving about with the ease and grace of ballerinas, showing off their gold stripes and long tasselled tails with great effect. They vanished remarkably quickly, however, when a barracuda started haring in their direction.

Beyond the causeway, past the abandoned Japanese bulldozer with its giant wheels half-sunk in the ground, I panted

up the knoll to Haddo bazaar, only to discover that traffic was practically at a standstill at that hour. Now there was nothing for it but to hope against hope that a taxi had returned to the stand in the meanwhile, and so I approached the betel leaf stall across the way to inquire where I could telephone from.

The shopkeeper was busy packing a leaf for his customers, two workmen-type individuals lounging on an empty packing-case. Pointing his liming stick over his shoulder he muttered, "Go to Guruswamy's shop. He has a telephone."

The workmen were struck by my blue jeans and were examining them with interest; apparently they had never seen such a garment before.

"Are you new here?" one of them asked, spitting out a lot of red saliva.

I said I was, and was anxious to get to Delaynepur as soon as I could.

"If it's to Delaynepur, take the bus. It goes at four," one of them said.

The shopkeeper aimed his liming stick at the timepiece ticking away on a shelf among a row of cigarette packets. "See the time?" he said, which appeared to be a quarter past four.

The two men guffawed.

"Since when has your clock started showing time?" one laughed.

"Don't believe that," the other warned. "People in the Andamans use clocks and watches for show only. We don't care for time here."

"I tell you it is right," the shopkeeper insisted. Then spying an old man coming over the rise, he called out, "Kallu Ram, has the bus gone?"

Kallu Ram came over almost out of breath. He was a small old man with a sausage-shaped moustache and carried a large umbrella. Folding the umbrella and tucking it under his arm, he drawled out, "How do I know if the bus has left? I've just checked off duty at the warehouse and am on my way home. If you want to be sure see if the ferry has left. The bus will not leave without taking passengers from the ferry."

The suggestion appealed to all present and the shopkeeper

stood up on his platform and looked towards the bay. "I can see the ferry," he said resuming his seat. "It's gone a good distance."

"I'm afraid you'll have to walk to Delaynepur," the shop-keeper advised.

"You want to go to Delaynepur?" Kallu Ram asked eyeing me with curiosity. "Will you ride in a lorry?"

"Yes," I said eagerly.

"Then come along," the old man said opening his umbrella and inviting me to share its shade.

The road climbed gently up a gradient, then turned right. In the open yard before Guruswamy's shop a lorry was being loaded by red-kerchiefed coolies.

"Will you drop this man at Delaynepur?" Kallu Ram said to the driver who was seated on the footboard ticking off something from a note-book.

The driver looked up and smiled graciously. "Of course I will, if your friend can wait until the loading is finished," he said.

We sat on a bench and watched the lorry filling with all manner of stuff, crates of condensed milk, pots and pans, pails, and so on.

"Come by the last boat?" Kallu Ram inquired, leaning forward and resting his chin on the crook of his umbrella.

I said I had.

"In which department will you be working?"

I said I was not a government servant but a visitor.

"Then what have you come here for?" the old man demanded, surprised.

"To see the islands."

Kallu Ram shook his head. "There is nothing to see in these islands, I tell you," he said. "Nothing. Only this Port Blair. And what's in this Port Blair, except these few shops and houses? Until a few years ago even these did not exist. There was only a prison. I have spent fifty-four years in these islands, and I know everything."

"Have you been here all the fifty-four years? Never been back to the mainland in the meanwhile?"

"Who can I go back to? I have lost touch with my people

there. They wrote me two letters in prison, but after that stopped writing. I don't even know if they are still alive."

It dawned on me that I was speaking to an old convict.

"It must be lonely for you," I said sympathizing.

"No, I'm not lonely. I've a wife and two sons. The sons are married. They live with us."

"How did you manage to bring your wife from the mainland? I thought you said you had lost touch with your people."

"I married a convict woman. There was a women's prison on this island in the old days and we were allowed to marry convict women. They used to hold monthly parades for that purpose, the men would stand in one line, and the women in the other, and we could choose whoever we wanted. The Chief Commissioner then declared us man and wife. It wasn't a legal marriage, mind you, and could be broken off just as easily, but it used to work, for most of us were lifers, and knew that nothing better was likely to come our way. I was lucky, I can assure you, for after my marriage the women's prison was closed down."

"How old were you when you came?"

"Only twenty-two," Kallu Ram said, full of self-pity. "Ah, well!" he sighed. "One does foolish things in one's youth, otherwise why should I have slaughtered two persons for the sake of a prostitute?"

The lorry was now full, and the driver pressed the starter. The coolies, their kerchiefs tied over their heads, were jumping in one by one.

"Hey, hey!" Kallu Ram called out rushing to the driver, dragging me behind him. "This man has still to get in."

I climbed in, using the wheel as a step.

The next second we were off, a large black umbrella calling after us. "Remember, it's at Delaynepur he has to get down. . . ."

Govindarajalu was waiting for me at the exhibition entrance when I reached there a good quarter of an hour late, thus missing the event's opening, but he assured me that I had not missed anything "except a bit of ribbon-cutting". We went in among a row of bamboo stalls decorated with the star-shaped lambapatti leaves in which the local produce was

displayed. They were mostly poor specimens, marble-sized tomatoes, ball-sized cabbages, and hardly any green vegetables. At the rice stall, the only cereal the islands produce, I was told that the crops were bumper, twelve thousand pounds to the acre, but the grains were big and coarse. "Good rice simply does not grow here," Govindarajalu observed, lifting up a fistful of paddy and letting it stream through his fingers. "Even most of the vegetables we eat come from Calcutta. Something wrong with the soil; God knows what."

Jackfruit and bananas grew to impressive sizes, however, and smelt sweet. So did pandanus and yam.

"How do you eat pandanus?" I asked out of curiosity, for I had never seen that pendulum-shaped fruit before.

"Never eaten it," said my friend, stroking the fruit which hung from the ceiling in bunches. "How is it eaten?" he repeated the question to the man in charge of the stall.

"Only Nicobaris eat it, we don't," the man said, making a wry face. "I'm not sure, but I believe they boil it until soft. Then they mash it into a paste, and eat it instead of rice."

The exhibition was only partly agricultural, for nearly half the stalls were devoted to representing the islands' business and industrial activity. There was, for instance, a handloom stall, a sari stall, a seashell stall, a lungi stall, a household goods display, a furniture stall, and so on. The government departments too were represented including the Police Force who showed off how they maintained inter-island communications by means of wireless, and the trophies they had collected in encounters with the Jarwas, bows and arrows, spears and clubs, pinned to a board with a red background.

Bangara, the Superintendent of Police, looking dapper in his white suit and a black bow-tie, noticed my interest in the exhibits. "I suppose you would like to see the Jarwas, wouldn't you?" he bantered, patting me on the back.

I said I certainly would.

"Why don't you meet Burn, our Jarwa hero? He is in charge of our Bush Police. There he is."

The tall Anglo-Burmese man hurrying with a small woman hanging on to him, in a way looked nondescript, but another way had the touch of the poet about him, the sleeves

of his shirt were rolled up, his tie sagged to one side, and a soft hat was tucked under his arm instead of covering his bald pate.

"Burn, Major Burn," Govindarajalu called out, at which the poet abruptly stopped, nearly letting the hat fall to the ground. For a moment he looked abstractly at my friend, then remembering, smiled. "Ah, you, Raju."

"I want you to meet my friend," Govindarajalu went on.

"How are you?" Burn said to me. "I have been curious to meet you. I saw you on the jetty the day you arrived."

"What aroused your curiosity?" I asked puzzled.

"The two guns on your shoulder. I wondered what you needed two guns for."

"Major Burn, my friend wants to see Jarwas," Govindarajalu interrupted.

"Ah! the good old Jarwas. Well, we will talk about that some other time. Come and have dinner with us tomorrow. Will eight o'clock do?"

The small woman had been silent so far, but on hearing of this precipitate invitation, she interrupted, "Rabbie, tomorrow you will be busy with the baby show."

"Thank you, Jean, for reminding me," said the Major, looking truly thankful. "Let's make it the day after tomorrow in that case."

The man's cordiality was embarrassing. "Thanks very much," I said. "But where do I come? I don't know your address."

"Who doesn't know where Burn lives? He is the most popular figure in Port Blair," Govindarajalu remarked.

"You will come with Govindarajalu naturally. Now will you excuse me?"

And the poet and his lady left.

Exhibitions and open-air shows, I discovered, were popular in Port Blair. Everybody came to them, met everybody else and exchanged gossip; they made the town's social life tick. There were many faces I could recognize in that crowd, among them Devasia, the lawyer. He was bustling about with a group of friends, but on seeing me, detached himself and came over.

"Mr. Vaidya," he said. "Have you met Dadoo Lal?" He sounded in earnest.

"Who is Dadoo Lal?" I had never heard that name before.

"You mean to tell me you haven't heard of Dadoo Lal!" the lawyer said, surprised. "Everybody in town knows Dadoo Lal. He is the doyen among old convicts. I thought you wanted to meet some old convicts."

"I'll be glad to meet him. Where is he?"

"He isn't here. You will have to see him at his farm. It's at Panighat, just across the bay. Take the ferry from Haddo and go to Bamboo Flats. Panighat is only a few minutes' walk from there."

"Any day?"

"Any day. I have spoken to him about you." And the lawyer departed.

Haddo jetty being on the way to his office Shrinivasan offered to drop me there the following morning. The ferry was at eight, and we reached the place exactly two minutes before that, and yet we found that the ferry had left. That was annoying, especially since the next ferry was not due to leave until five hours later. Shrinivasan who was as annoyed as myself, asked a local man why the boat had left earlier, and received the exasperating reply, "Because the bus arrived earlier."

"I'll send you over in a Forest Department boat; one is due to leave in an hour," Shrinivasan consoled me as we drove on to Chatham.

The Forest Department boat, a smallish motor launch, lay moored some distance from the jetty, and had to be approached first by crossing a barge, then descending upon a raft of logs, thence over a shaky plank designed to serve the purpose of a gangway. It was an old craft and listed to one side with the result we had to roll up our trouser ends to withstand the sousing by the bow waves. The bay water was calm, but occasionally fish leaped out of it and made it foamy white.

"Too many sharks today," grumbled the master, a young, taciturn fellow whose gaze was roving everywhere. "Watch that," he said excitedly, pointing to a spot to the right where three sharks were fast overtaking a shoal of largish fish.

In pursuit the trio ran in close formation, but on reaching

their prey separated and attacked singly. Instantly the water became flurried and crimson patches rose to the surface.

"Ah, well! Such is life," sighed the glum old mechanic watching the conclusion with morbid interest.

Bamboo Flats, I discovered, was no town at all, not even a village, just a huddle of huts including a few stalls. Devasia had asked me to find my way from there, so I inquired from a tea-stall man. Instead of telling it, he directed me to a coconut garden along the road where he said Dadoo Lal's son worked.

Dadoo Lal's son, a young fellow in shorts, was digging around the roots of a sapling in the coconut garden. At my call he straightened up, and looking over his shoulder, his pickaxe held aloft, shouted, "You want to see my father? Then take the road along the water, and keep to it. He is at home."

"How far is it?"

The pickaxe had gone down in the meanwhile. The man shouted between his legs, "Not far. Only a ten minutes' walk."

Over the masonry bund that walled off the bay waters I descended upon a dirt road. On the one side of it was the bay, and on the other the densely wooded Harriett Hill, black boulders jutting out of it like wild elephants. Here and there patches of the jungle had been cleared to make terraced fields, and solitary huts rose like sentinels among them.

Govindarajalu had provided me with a servant for that day's outing, someone to carry my food and act as a guide generally, a young Madrassi who had followed me sheepishly from a distance. We were sticking closely to the road the young man in the coconut garden had recommended, just the same I felt the urge to make doubly sure, for the penalty of missing one's way in the Andamans is to penetrate deeper and deeper into the forest and get lost. However, there was no point in asking my servant for guidance, for he knew no language besides his native Tamil of which I was totally ignorant.

Luckily we came upon a group of villagers clustered around a mobile hulling mill dragged by two bullocks, and I asked in Hindustani if anyone could tell me whether I was on the right road to Dadoo Lal's and how long it would take. Hearing me every head turned in my direction and poured forth a torrent

of words, alas! none of them intelligible for it was all in Tamil. Noticing the dismayed look on my face the servant decided it was his opportunity to be of help, so rushing among the crowd like an old stage hero about to slay the villain he stentoriously plied them with questions, and receiving monosyllabic answers returned to the road beckoning me to follow him.

There was a purpose in my inquiry; I was anxious to calculate how long it would take for the journey so I could apportion the time I could spend with Dadoo Lal, for the Forest Department boatman had asked me to return to Bamboo Flats at four sharp beyond which he said he could not wait. So I asked the servant what the men had told him. His response was a lighthearted grin and the repetition of the words, "Dadoo Lal, Dadoo Lal."

"Damn you, how long will it take, that's what I want to know," I shouted in exasperation, and I must have sounded savage for he fell back without a word.

My anxiety to get correct information about the route was not so misplaced after all, for some way ahead the road bifurcated, putting us in a quandary as to which turning to take, whether the fork leading into the jungle, or the one that skirted the shore. And as I was pondering the problem I heard the sounds of a stampede in my rear. I looked back just in time to notice a big female buffalo with a grown-up calf making for us at a terrific speed, and a boy running behind them yelling madly.

Seeing the spectacle my Tamil servant became petrified and stood rooted to the spot, but I hurriedly jumped to one side and hid in a bush. The two brutes ignored the servant and came headlong for me, but, seeing me gone, snorted around the bush and galloped away.

The experience was nerve-shattering, nevertheless I did not like the way my Tamil servant was looking accusingly at the thoroughly frightened boy. When I emerged from the bush the boy came over, and apologized in good Hindustani. "Sir, forgive me, they are my buffaloes. I was grazing them when they saw you and charged. It was your clothes they panicked at. Buffaloes don't like city clothes, they attack anyone wearing them."

I smiled at him to indicate that all was forgiven and forgotten. As a matter of fact I regarded him as a godsend, for he could tell us which turning to take. "How do I get to Dadoo Lal's?" I asked.

"This way, sir," the boy said obligingly, indicating the road leading into the forest. "His house is on the other side of the hill."

The road went up a densely wooded pass and descended into a V-shaped valley. There was just one single farm in that valley surrounded by a hedge, and behind it rose a nice, well-built homestead.

I stopped at the wicket gate and called out, "Dadoo Lal."

Small children playing in the yard looked startled, and seeing us ran behind the house.

"Dadoo Lal," I called out again.

A woman disappeared through a wooden door on the other side of the house.

Footfalls inside, the wooden door rattles open, and out struts a man in shorts and a shirt. Shading his eyes with his palm he examines me carefully and says, "Yes, this is Dadoo Lal's. I am Dadoo Lal." His words sound more than a statement of fact, the tone of voice carries with it a question, "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"So you are Dadoo Lal," I said, climbing up on the veranda. "I am glad you are at home. Devasia must have told you about me. I come from the mainland."

A flicker of recognition lit up Dadoo Lal's face. He pulled a chair from under a rough table, and offering it, said, "So you are the writer. Yes, Devasia did tell me about you." Then, imperiously, "You look tired. Let me get you a drink of water." And without waiting for my answer disappeared through the door.

The brass tumbler he offered shone like gold, and the water inside was crystal clear, nevertheless I could not help remarking, "Are you sure it is all right? No dysentery?"

"Drink it," Dadoo Lal said, thrusting the tumbler into my hands. "Do you think I am a fool to drink foul water?"

Well, I had no answer for that, and it was obvious Dadoo Lal did not expect one either. He now noticed the servant

standing in a corner and turned his full attention upon him. "Why don't you serve the sahib his food? Can't you see he is hungry?" However, noticing that the man did not understand him, he gestured energetically towards me and the food container.

My bearer had met his master at last. His self-composure melted away at the sound of those firm words and florid gestures. Instantly he disentangled the dishes and shoved them before me.

"What? Does anybody serve food like that?" Dadoo Lal thundered. "Go and cut a banana leaf and serve on that." I don't know how, but the servant seemed to grasp all that and promptly betook himself with my penknife.

Dadoo Lal was now at me. "You say you have come here to write a book. What is so interesting about this place?"

What sort of a man was this, barraging me with questions, and putting me on the defensive? I decided to be diplomatic. "One of the interesting things is you," I said, trying to flatter as well as come to the point at the same time. "You should have been dead long ago, hung on the gallows. But look at it. You are alive and well, and what a lot of things you have gathered around yourself. Isn't that interesting?"

At this observation the man's manner changed, he became reflective, and stood gazing at the rafters. "What you say is true," he said softly. "I should have been dead fifty years ago, but I am still alive." His pale liquid eyes acquired an intensive quality. "You know, how funny is man's mind. I never thought of all these things before you asked that question. Today all I think of is my family, my farm, my cattle, and what I am going to do tomorrow. When I was in the condemned cell all I thought about was when I was going to die, whether it would be the following day, the day after, or the next month. Even when my sentence was reduced to life imprisonment I still thought of death for I heard that Kalapani was an awful place where convicts died like flies. I had a foretaste of that on the voyage out here. Eight convicts died in that filthy dark hold where we were cooped up. We just chucked them overboard as if they were dirt. In those days who cared for prisoners' lives? When we arrived, I knew what to expect for the Chief Com-

missioner warned us, 'Don't disobey your officers' orders: you will receive heavy penalties for that, even the death penalty.' He wasn't just frightening us, for in those days even to look back at a warder was regarded as disobedience. And the food they gave us, dirty, filthy muck, it is a wonder that we survived. If we fell ill, well, there was no hope of getting any medical attention until we were practically on our death-beds. It was horrible. But I went through all that, and am still alive. It's quite wonderful. You are right, not many people could have an experience like that. One thing is certain: if God means to protect someone, who can do him harm?"

My servant returned and dished out the food which looked appetizing on that freshly-washed banana leaf. Dadoo Lal stared at it for a moment, and exclaimed, "That's all rice. Have some wheat chapati. Or some jowar bread. Shall I ask my daughter-in-law to cook some? It is home-grown wheat." He went on proudly, "Experts say Andaman soil is good only for rice. I have proved you can cultivate anything in it, wheat, jowar, even cotton. When President Rajendra Prasad toured these islands four years ago he specially came to my farm to congratulate me. He gave me a certificate of merit. I told him, 'Sir, unless you get down from that car of yours, and look over my farm I will consider you have not paid me a visit at all.' But the President said, 'Dadoo Lal, I'm an old man, and I'm ill. Don't make me get down.' I said, 'All right, sir, if you are ill. But don't say you are old. You are no older than me.' He was pleased with my work and sanctioned a well for my farm at government expense. They haven't built it yet, mind you. So you see, you will be eating some real Andaman bread." He at once turned to the door and shouted, "Cook a chapati, someone inside, please."

"No, no, this is enough, otherwise I would have gladly eaten your chapaties," I pleaded. By now I had judged the man; he was a first-class autocrat, and only humbleness was likely to make him see reason.

"All right," Dadoo Lal compromised. "Next time you come, don't bring your own food. Eat with me."

In that fresh air and in those rustic surroundings the food tasted divine, and I felt considerably rested.

"Why don't you sit down? You make me feel self-conscious by standing up," I said, for the man had been on his feet all that time.

"Don't worry about me," he waved me off. "I'm seventy-two, but by the grace of God still perfectly strong. We Andaman farmers have to be strong and hard-working, otherwise weeds grow in this soil. You see, I have forty acres, sixty head of cattle, and an orchard, and that involves a lot of work. I am used to hard work."

"I suppose you learnt to work hard in prison?"

For the first time Dadoo Lal sighed. "That was no work, good man, that was punishment. Much of the work that was given to us wasn't necessary at all, and yet we had to do it, every bit of it. By sunset each one had to finish his daily task, whatever happened. If it was trees, a certain number had to be felled. If it was digging, a certain number of square feet had to be dug. If it was carrying earth loads, so many baskets had to be carried, there was no getting away from it, rain or shine. We used to be so afraid in those days that many convicts who couldn't finish their daily task would commit suicide rather than face their warders. They would make ropes out of vines, tie them around their necks, and jump from trees. Every morning when we set out for work we used to come across corpses hanging from trees. Mind you, today I toil just as hard as I did then, but I do that willingly, because it is for my benefit."

Dadoo Lal noticed that I was smiling. "What are you laughing at?" he demanded.

"Everyone tells me that life was much more tolerable in prison than you describe," I said.

"Ah! Those better days you talk of came after my time. I was released in 1919—you see I got a twelve-year remission of sentence for saving the Assistant Commissioner's life when a convict attacked him with a knife. I will tell you how those improvements came. The government was worried because too many convicts were dying in those days. They appointed a new medical officer, one Colonel Beadon, to find out why. He arrived after the First World War. He examined thousands of convicts and found that every one of them had a diseased liver.

He made a strong report, and consequently the Administration changed the system."

"What made you hang on to these islands after your release? Why didn't you go back to your village?"

"My luck had changed. As a reward for saving the Assistant Commissioner's life they gave me a coconut garden to look after. That brought me a bit of money selling the coconuts in Rangoon. Since then things have been going very well for me."

At this point there was an outburst of children inside the house, shouts and screams and whimperings, accompanied by women's raised voices. The autocrat glared through the door and shouted, "Keep those children quiet. Can't you hear men are talking?" then to me with a pleased smile, "My grandchildren. I have three sons and two daughters. Those are their children. Altogether we are twenty-five in this family."

My Tamil servant had cleared the table and taken the dishes away to wash and eat his own food. I now wanted to photograph, and said so to Dadoo Lal. He took me along to the rear of the house, mustered all the available family, and stood among them. "Too bad you have come at this hour," he said. "Most of my family members are out at the moment." After the photograph he waved his family back into the house.

"Your sons and daughters married locally, I suppose?" I said.

Dadoo Lal shrank back in horror. "Oh, no. We belong to the Krishna Gotra community. We are high-caste Hindus and cannot marry outside our community. After my release I fetched my wife from the mainland, and she gave me my children. They were all born here, but I took every one of them back to our district to get married. They are all married in Krishna Gotra families."

We went into the farm. There were acres and acres of it all ploughed up and ready to sow. In the centre of the fields was a thatch shed where two large drums were overflowing with water. "Look at my water supply," Dadoo Lal said proudly indicating the cloth wadding around the ends of bamboo gutters from which water was dripping into the drums. "Can any dirt get into that water? See where it comes from." He pointed to the hill behind where the system of gutters led.

"There's a spring on that hill. This water comes from there. Now I'll show you something else."

He led me to an orchard teeming with bananas, papayas and lemons. Behind the orchard was a recently dug trench. "You know what that is for?" he went on. "That's to bund the rain-water so I can grow vegetables all the year round. You see, the Andamans get abundant rainfall, but it all drains away to the sea because of the sloping ground. I propose to conserve it by means of bunding." The man then dragged me to yet another part where holes had been dug. "This is for my mango grove. I plan to have sixty trees. I've already ordered the grafts from Madras." Then discovering a partly filled hole he buckled down to clearing it with his bare hands, throwing a shower of clods over his shoulder.

I took the opportunity to rest my feet and survey the scene. There before me were the acres, all ready to bear. There was the orchard, lush and well-tended. There were the cattle browsing peacefully on the hill slope. And there down below was a house agog with the voices of children. And the threads of all this bustling and prosperous life led back to this little man who once upon a time was so near death.

Dadoo Lal was up again. "They are trying to make a free settlement of the Andamans," he said, wiping his dusty hands on his shorts. "But they don't know how. This is because those who rule here are penpushers. What do they know of the land and its difficulties? The book tells them to build roads, so they are building roads. Roads for what? Take people into the wilderness? I say cultivate the land first. Give people water. Make life possible. Then make roads. Ah! those penpushers!" he sneered.

The sun was low over the hill crest and my watch indicated a little past three, time to make a move if I wanted to catch the Forest Department boat. I said so to Dadoo Lal. He turned upon me. "What sort of a visit is this? You haven't seen half my place," he complained as the two of us began picking our way back to the house. "You must come again. Stay the night with me." He suddenly stopped. "You fond of shooting? There is plenty of game on this hill. You can use my gun. Yes, I have a fully licensed gun."

Back at the house the Tamil servant had wound up everything and was squatting lazily on the floor, slapping at flies that kept on alighting on his bare thighs.

"Shall I ask my daughter-in-law to make some tea for you?" Dadoo Lal asked. I said there was no time.

Then I made bold to ask what had been on my mind for a long time. "Who did you murder, Dadoo Lal? How did you murder? What do you think of it now?"

The loquacious man seemed reluctant to answer a question for the first time. "What do you want to know that for? That's all old history. I never think of it. How can I with so many things to do?"

The children had become bolder about me by now and stood in a row to say good-bye, but when I tried to pat them on their heads they ran away giggling.

Dadoo Lal walked with us up to the top of the pass. Thrusting his arm out he said, "Go straight along this road. You will be in Bamboo Flats in half an hour. Mark my words, half an hour." The way he said it sounded more like a command than a road direction.

CHAPTER FIVE

MANHUNTER TERRITORY

BURN's house, like Burn himself, had the touch of the poet about it, a four-roomed cottage with a nice garden, but a gate made of poles laid across a gap in the hedge. Govindarajalu, tilting the scales at fifteen stones, winced at the sight of the waist-high barrier, but Burn was soon to our rescue thrusting the poles into the hedge to make a passageway. "That's to keep out cows," he explained as we followed him by the gravel path to the cane chairs arranged around a standing lamp. "I called you early because I want to show you some of my films," he said, inviting us to sit down.

Jean was soon with us, looking pretty in a printed frock, bringing with her a trayful of lemon squash with real ice cubes in it, a treat in ice-factoryless Port Blair. She looked askance at Burn who was fiddling with the projector, focusing on a folding screen placed under an oleander bush.

"Rabbie, you've got this thing out. How long will you be?" she inquired apprehensively.

"Oh, about half an hour," Burn replied without taking his attention off the gadget.

"Don't let it be longer. Dinner is practically ready," she warned, disappearing into the house.

The lamp was switched off and we sat watching the police inspector's cinematographic skill. It was a commendable effort. Most of the shots described the islands' scenic beauty and the tribes that live in them, their jungles, and the sea. There were a few others about social events in Port Blair including one in which Burn was shown receiving the Police Medal from the Chief Commissioner at a Republic Day review. When the show was over I asked Burn what he got the medal for; it is the highest decoration given by the police force for acts of gallantry.

"For our providential escape from the Jarwas," Burn said, folding the equipment and putting it away.

"Oh, no!" Govindarajalu objected. "You must tell Mr. Vaidya the full story." Then to me, "Major Burn is a brave man, you know."

Burn was still reluctant, but Govindarajalu managed to coax him. Crossing his legs and lighting his pipe Burn went on, "I suppose you know the type these Jarwas are, shoot at you from bushes and all that, bad eggs all told. But our Administration's policy is to befriend them just the same. The burden of carrying out this policy falls on us policemen. Now the age-old method employed to befriend savage tribes is to give them gifts and win their confidence, and that is how we had been attacking the problem. We made our overtures at a village on the west coast near Port Campbell. We chose that place because we've reasons to believe that that happens to be one of their main villages. We would go there in our police boat at intervals of a fortnight, park her out in the open sea, and ourselves proceed to the spot in a dinghy fitted with an outboard. The party used to consist of Santok, our then Superintendent of Police, Hla Din, our Burmese sergeant, and myself. While Hla Din sat in the dinghy and kept the outboard going just in case, Santok and I would wade out and go to the village which was a hundred yards behind the beach. There we would place the gifts of coloured cloth, sugar, tobacco, matches and so on, and return. Although we did nothing to arouse their suspicion, the savages nevertheless betook themselves to the neighbouring forest and hid there until we had left. Well, one could make allowances for that, for after all no one had approached them in this manner before. The important thing was that no harm came to us, not as much as a stone had been pelted, and furthermore we found that the gifts were being accepted which was an encouraging sign. When that happened on six consecutive occasions we felt it was a matter of time before they dropped their shyness and became friendly. On our seventh visit, instead of returning to the beach by our regular route, we made a detour from the other side of the village. It wasn't a long walk by any means, the scenery was beautiful and

Santok took pictures galore with his new Leica. However, when we reached the beach we noticed that Hla Din was waving frantically and was rushing the dinghy to us. At first we couldn't understand what the fellow meant, but when I looked over my shoulder I found that Jarwas with spears and arrows were creeping upon us from the bushes. Now this was hardly the sort of reception we expected, and to indicate that we meant no harm we threw up our hands and waved. Their reaction to our gesture was to make one wild dash towards us, dozens of them poured upon the beach yelling madly. Now there was nothing for it but to make a dash for the dinghy, and as we were struggling through the water a shower of arrows fell upon us. The situation was obviously critical, so I whipped out my revolver and fired a few shots in the air. That had the desired effect; our attackers took fright and ran back, enabling us to make good our escape."

"What a close shave!" I said.

"We were happy to have got away without killing anyone. Hla Din was delirious with joy and sang all the lewd songs there are in the Burmese language. Only Santok sulked. In the *mêlée* he had dropped his camera in the water and ruined it for good and all."

During the showing of the films Jean had been running in and out of the house to see if we had finished. Now that she found that the equipment was packed away and we were merely talking, she stood on the balcony and called, "Hurry up, or the dinner will get cold."

The dinner was a real treat and we settled down to it with great gusto: fresh tomato soup, fish hors d'œuvre, venison, chicken curry and rice, and a blancmange coated with thick fresh cream. Then we withdrew to the garden again for coffee.

I liked Burn's house, it had an artistic touch about it, flowers everywhere, the walls hung with knickknacks including dolls made out of shells, books on shelves, good photographs. What could have made this man who spoke with a cultured accent and had an excellent vocabulary, take to policing in a jungly area? "Don't you get fed up with jungle life?" I asked.

"Rabbie loves jungles." Jean answered in his place, sounding partly proud, partly hurt. "It's his second home. More than half the month he spends in the jungles."

"I'm a born jungly, what can I do?" Burn guffawed. Then he became pensive. "You see, I can't escape from the jungle, it seems I'm destined to spend my life in it. I'm from the Burmese town of Moulmein, a nice little place with a wonderful jungle around it. As a boy I used to go catapult shooting in it, and that created a taste for outdoor life in me. As luck would have it the first job I got was in the jungles, supervising timber extraction for a Moulmein company. It lasted two years. Then I went to Rangoon and joined the Burma Oil Company. That was the only time I worked in civilized surroundings. Then came the war, the Burma Oil Company packed up and I found myself in the army. Well, that was the jungle again, for most of the Burmese war was fought in the jungles. When we retreated to India I joined the Chindits, and that meant more jungle fighting. After the war I left the army and became the manager of a rubber plantation in the Andamans. Unfortunately the plantation failed, and I had to get a new job, that of a labour supervisor engaged on clearing jungles to settle refugees in. The final seal upon my jungle career was placed by Macarthy, our then Superintendent of Police. He called me and said, 'These Jarwas are becoming troublesome, Rabbie, and the settlers are panic-stricken. I'm planning to start a Bush Police section, and considering your Chindit experience I would like you to take it over.' Well, I found myself saying yes, and that's how I became a jungly policeman." He added, with obvious sincerity, "Mind you, I don't complain. I like jungle life."

"Yes, but what about me?" Jean grumbled. "I get lonely when you are away."

"That's my job, Jean," Burn pleaded. "Listen to me, Mr. Vaidya. We have thirty-six Bush Police posts, all strung around the Reserve, each containing anything from six to a dozen lads. These outposts are tucked away in the depth of forests, and I have to carry their provisions to them, otherwise the lads will starve. I make one round trip once a month

covering all the outposts, and that takes anything from a fortnight to three weeks, depending upon the weather. You see, most of this trip has to be done by boat, for there are hardly any roads in the Andamans."

Govindarajalu, who had been lying still and drowsy in his chair, suddenly woke up to remark: "You must take Mr. Vaidya with you, Major Burn. He wants to see Jarwas."

"I don't know if he will be able to see Jarwas, but he is welcome to join me."

We had already finished one pot of coffee and Jean asked if we would care for another, and in these idyllic surroundings, a star-spangled sky above, a semi-visible darkness beyond, and a breeze wafting the smell of scented flowers, one was tempted to say yes. But all good things have to come to an end, all of us were feeling sleepy after that substantial meal, so we rose and struggled back over the gravel path to the waiting taxi.

Burn dropped in at our place a few days later, but the news he had to give was disappointing. The provisioning trip on which I had hoped to accompany him had to be postponed because, as he explained, "The *Cholunga* has run out of fuel and the Marine Department has requisitioned our *Nilkamal* to bat for her." The *Cholunga* is the big bloated ferry that does the north-south run in the Andamans.

"What a shame!" I said, disappointed.

Burn had anticipated some such reaction on my part, and so had prepared the palliative for it. "Never mind, I've something else laid on for you," he said. "We will go to Tirur instead. That's our outpost in the south. We can go there by road."

We were sitting in the drawing-room, and it being Sunday, Shrinivasan too was at home. Burn wasn't a person he ran across in the normal course of his duties so decided to take up a matter that had been worrying him for some time past.

"Burn, why don't you do something about Jarwas?" he said. "They are harassing my logging elephants. They killed a fine tusker last month. Now they have injured another. We had to put that poor animal in the hospital; he has a big hole

in his foot. Noor Mohammed," he called out to the bearer, "bring that arrow from my study."

Noor Mohammed fetched the arrow, a two-foot long affair with a wooden head the shape of a slim torpedo. "See that?" Shrinivasan remarked angrily. "That's the arrow we extracted from the elephant's foot. The head is made of aricanut wood. That's damned hard."

"A pretty vicious thing," Burn agreed, examining the weapon, vainly trying to break it with his hands. He handed back the arrow and said: "Mr. Shrinivasan, I've a suggestion to make. Can't you keep your animals within a reasonable distance of your camps? You see, your elephants go grazing inside the Reserve, and I'm powerless to protect them there."

The Chief Conservator sank back in despair. "Now, Burn, you should realize that we have to let them out to graze, but how can we tell them, 'Go so far and no farther'? They are animals."

"Would it be possible to post a guard around where they graze?" Burn suggested as a practical remedy.

Shrinivasan laughed cynically. "My dear man, my guards themselves are afraid. Who wouldn't be in this territory? Actually one of our camps is in a state of jitters. They say there has been continuous buttress-beating in their area. Do you think the Jarwas are up to some mischief?"

Burn drew at his pipe thoughtfully. "We, too, have received some news," he said. "Our boys came upon a Jarwa party at Tirur recently. I wonder if that indicates that the savages are on the move. Anyway, I'll find out about it on my next trip."

Burn's provisioning trip to Tirur looked like a minor armed expedition. I was all packed and ready when the big grey truck arrived, carrying in its rear Sergeant Hla Din and two armed policemen including one with a sten gun. They took my luggage in, while I eased in the front between Burn and the truck driver.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when we started, and the weather was perfect. For many miles we passed through an avenue of raintrees whose huge buttresses encroached upon the road's surface. Then came paddy fields, followed

by a stretch of marshland, and after that a strip of forest. It was so damp in that forest I could almost feel moisture beads forming in my lungs. The trees were of medium height, but down below on the ground was thick brushwood. Then we came upon a small tunnel-like hole in the shrubbery, something resembling a game path.

Burn motioned the driver to stop. "Well, Mr. Vaidya, we've come to the Jarwa highway," he said, getting down. "You see, every now and again groups of Jarwas come over from Rutland Island, which is behind this hill, and go foraging along the coast right up to North Andaman. It is several days' march and they use certain fixed places to halt. Anthropologists call them kitchenmiddens. We are near one. Shall we see it?"

I said I would like to.

I followed behind Burn. Close beside the road was an earthen wall, about waist-high, overgrown with weeds. We crossed it and entered a clearing with a flat mud platform. Burn climbed upon that, scratched the soil with his fingernails, and extracted a couple of shells. He held them on the palm of his hand and showing them, said, "These are their leavings. Jarwas eat shell-meat like we eat rice, it's their staple food. They bake them and eat the inside and discard the shell. Whenever you come upon a mud platform like this and there are shells around it, you can be reasonably certain it is a kitchenmidden. The anthropologists from Port Blair have worked on this one. They say the shells go down to dozens of feet which means the tribesmen must have used this place for centuries." He threw away the shells and wiped his hands on his shorts.

I looked around to view the scene. The forest was beautiful, green everywhere and radiant in the light of the sun. But if it was the highway Jarwas used for their inter-island march, I wasn't keen on tarrying in it too long. The undergrowth was dense, and who knew a woolly head might be lurking inside it spoiling to discharge an aricanut arrow.

"All you say sounds wonderful, Burn," I said, "but are you sure these bushes are safe?"

"Well, we've to persuade ourselves that they are." Burn smiled enigmatically, then added, "Anyway, let's get going; we've quite a bit of journey still ahead of us."

The road went upwards and the truck made a devil of a noise in the first gear. It coughed and wheezed and spluttered making conversation impossible. Over on the other side where the road descended we went into top gear, and that was some relief, but not enough for my taut nerves, for the lorry had to do a tight-rope walk along the edge of a precipice. Then came a brief span of populated plain, and after that another hilly jungle. And so it went on right up to Conlinpur where the road terminated in a bridge.

Conlinpur was a cultivated valley and most of the settlers were Burmese. Every house had a pagoda-shaped roof, and when our truck passed by, doors opened and heads peered out to shout, "Thakin Burn, Thakin Burn," "Thakin" being the Burmese equivalent of the English "sir". It was obvious that Burn was a popular figure among the Burmese, for as soon as we alighted a crowd gathered around to exchange gossip with my companion. I could not follow their conversation, but it sounded jolly, for every so often there would be peals of laughter.

It was gratifying to see the back of that monstrous truck whose springless seats had made a certain part of my body sore, but the dug-out beached below in the small creek, in which the next part of our journey was to be executed, looked hardly like an improvement. The cigar-shaped craft was so packed with luggage and personnel—some Bush Police lads had arrived to give us escort—three-fourths of it was already under water, and when Burn and I, hardly light-weights, got in it almost sank. Luckily the thing was fitted with an outboard—Burn always carries it with him wherever he goes—and Hla Din, sitting delightedly in the prow, balanced it neatly and made it go at a merry speed.

The police escort, consisting of six lads dressed in shorts, singlets and rubber-soled shoes, seemed to regard the trip very much in the nature of an outing. Conlinpur was far from my idea of a town, a collection of isolated homesteads with not a shop to boast, and yet the boys were happy for the

change. They were free and easy in their talk with Burn and plied him with questions, so hungry they seemed to be for company and news.

"I feel sorry for these lads," Burn said feelingly to me. "They remain cooped up in the forest month after month. The only time they see a bit of civilization is when they are posted to headquarters at Port Blair. And that happens once in a blue moon."

The creek was only slightly broader than a stream and for half a mile or more we saw nothing save the steep mudbanks rising on either side of us. Then the banks fell revealing the rugged landscape of wild bushes fringed by young mangroves. These were pretty little rushes adorned with purple flowers, and their reflection in the mirror-clear water looked enchanting. Bird life was vivid and attractive, bulbuls sang in trees, doves cooed on branches, and egrets flew leisurely against an indolent sky. The most spectacular were kingfishers, little creatures no bigger than sparrows with a green plumage and steel-blue wings. They would dart out of the mangrove blossoms, dive headlong into the water and rise again holding fingerlings in their lipstick beaks.

Andaman landscape has the faces of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. For a time its beauty makes you speechless, then comes a complete change that strikes fear in your heart. Here I was marvelling at the superlative beauty of the countryside, wondering if there was any part of the world that could better it, when on rounding a corner we were plunged into fearful eeriness. The mangroves around us were no more flowering shrubs, but a huge forest spreading far upon the banks, their crowns so thickly clustered that the mud upon which they stood was swathed in a gloomy twilight. The eeriest of all was the silence, we could just as well be going through a vast mortuary, the only sound to be heard being that of our outboard.

"Awful things, these swamps," Burn said, "and terrible after dark when the sandflies rise. In the old penal settlement days they used to tie up recalcitrant convicts here. Left there for the night, they would be whining for mercy the following morning, so badly bitten were they by sandflies.

They are small insects, no bigger than pinheads, but their bites cause terrible swelling and the itch lasts for days."

Half-way we branched into a side stream. Here the mangroves leaned low over the water making us duck constantly to save our heads. By and by the thickness of the forest reduced and we were passing through rushes again. The stream narrowed rapidly until at a sharp turn the outboard hiccupped for the last time and the dugout nosed into a muddy bank. Using the prow as a step we quickly alighted, thankful to stretch our legs.

The place we had arrived at was the Tirur beachhead. This is where we would spend the night, but at the moment we had called merely to discharge luggage and disembark the lads who were to carry it to camp. As soon as that was done we resumed our journey.

With its load lightened the craft made rapid progress and we were soon in the main body of the creek. The stream widened to a hundred feet or more, but now we were obstructed by dead mangrove trees lying across the water, some so huge we had to hug the bank to circumvent them. It was dreadful to think what would happen to us if the craft were to overturn in this morass for the current in the stream was strong, and the banks consisted of thick soft mud in which elongated mangrove seeds sank as soon as they dropped from the branches.

"There is so much mangrove in this area it can supply all the telegraph and telephone pole needs of our country," Burn said, pointing to the enormous heights and straight round girths of the trees. "You see, this is a virgin forest. Until we established our outposts people used to be frightened to come here."

And once again the typical Andaman phenomenon of sudden change. When we rounded a corner the mangrove forest abruptly ceased, revealing the vast, sunlit expanse of Constance Bay.

A line of Bush Police had already formed on the shore to receive us, the noisy outboard having given them the warning of our approach. They waded into the water and beached the dugout, while we alighted in bare feet, frightening away

hundreds of soldier crabs who scurried frantically into their holes.

Constance Bay was a shallow circular lake about two miles in diameter and bounded along three-fourths of its circumference by a vivid forest. Its meeting point with the Bay of Bengal was marked by a white line of foam where breakers from the open sea pounded upon a submerged coral reef. At full tide the lake filled practically to the brim and the surrounding trees seemed to float in water, but at ebb a beautiful beach arose with here and there intersections of sandbars.

The Bush Police outpost was situated on the southern side of the bay, three bamboo huts raised on platforms, and we climbed into the foremost which was apparently used as a club-house. As we lay stretched out on the cotton rugs spread out on the floor and inhaled the cool, balmy air my eyes began to close, but I promptly shook myself into wakefulness when a welcome pot of tea arrived together with a plateful of hard-boiled eggs. Burn must have noticed the hungry look in my eyes as I viewed those eggs, for he tactfully remarked, "Eat plenty of those; they are just the diet for this sort of country."

"What! All those!" I said to cover up my embarrassment.

"Another dozen if you can. There is no shortage of eggs in the Andamans. Poultry thrives here because there are no predators of any sort, no jackals, no mongoose, no lynxes, not even kites, vultures or eagles. All our outposts keep poultry. We encourage them to, for it helps to solve their food problem."

While we sat drinking our tea the police lads busied themselves bringing in the provisions we had brought for them, sackfuls of rice, potatoes, lentils, onions, packets of matches, biris for smokes, condiments and so on. The sacks were heavy but the lads carried them happily, laughing and joking as they lugged them from the dugout to the next hut which was their kitchen-cum-store room. It seemed the provisions had arrived in the nick of time, for when the transporting was over Joseph, their corporal, came over and said, "Sir, all last week we had been waiting for you. I don't know what we would have done had you not arrived today."

"Why? Haven't you been shooting lately?" Burn asked.

"We have, but we are somewhat tired of eating deer meat all the time. After all one likes to eat rice also." Then noticing that our pot was empty he went in to fetch more tea.

"These jungles are full of spotted deer and wild pig," Burn said to me. "The lads shoot their own meat. Their daily patrol takes them up to the next post, and on the way they shoot whatever they come across, birds, animals, fish. The noise of the shooting fulfils another useful purpose: it warns the Jarwas where the Reserve boundary lies and beyond which they should not venture."

"What happens if the lads come across Jarwas? Do they shoot or do they withdraw?"

"The instructions are, don't shoot except in a grave emergency. Our main purpose is to frighten the tribesmen back into their Reserve, that's all. Not an easy task to perform, mind you, for often enough tricky situations arise. But our boys are resourceful and handle them with confidence. The encounter I spoke to you about took place in this region. Let's ask Joseph. Joseph, what happened when you met the Jarwa party?"

Joseph put down the pot of tea and laughed. These Bush Police lads, I noticed, always laughed. "We didn't meet them, it was the lads from the next outpost." He pointed to the east. "That's where it happened. There were three Jarwas in that group. Apparently they were out hunting. The meeting was so unexpected both sides stood still and looked at each other in utter amazement. After a moment the Jarwas withdrew, but in their usual, cunning way. The foremost man walked straight back baiting the lads to follow him, while the two behind quickly hid in the bushes with a view to closing in from the rear if our lads took it. But our boys were wise to that trick. They stood their ground until the two grew tired, came out of their hiding and went away."

"A typical Jarwa ambush," Burn observed, adding, "but I'm relieved to learn that it does not indicate any widespread activity on their part."

"Do Jarwas attack at close quarters or from a distance?"

"It depends," Burn observed. "As a rule from close quarters,

for they prefer to use spears. Arrows they use only in an emergency for there is always the danger of their getting lost, and the savages are sparing with their weapons because iron is difficult for them to come by. The iron they use is gathered from shipwrecks or whatever we abandon. Once I found a spear blade made out of a ploughshare. It must have taken them months to grind it to the required size."

"Have you seen Jarwas?" I asked Joseph out of curiosity.

"I have," he grinned. "Terrible fellows, black, with hair like charred coconut husk. But one rarely sees them, they take cover the moment they spot you. Just like wild animals."

At this point two shots rang out on the other side of the creek plunging the outpost in a state of excitement. The lads left whatever they had in hand and hurried over to the beach followed by the howling mob of mongrels who abounded in this place. The sight that greeted them would have aroused anyone's pity, Sergeant Hla Din struggling in neck-deep water to get at some teal which had alighted on a sandbar. After great effort he made it, and taking a careful aim with Burn's .22 rifle which he had borrowed for the purpose, let go. The teal rose calmly from their perch and descended upon the next sandbar.

The Sergeant was a persevering man, however. Undismayed he went after them again, but the birds seemed to make fun of his marksmanship. They lured him from sandbar to sandbar without leaving behind a single casualty until finally they withdrew to a remote pool in the north-eastern corner which being cut off by a creek was difficult to approach. The Sergeant faltered helplessly for a while on that creek, and thinking the better of it entered the jungle instead for easier prey. How everybody laughed.

"He won't get them. The birds are too clever," a lad remarked.

"He will get something else in their place," Burn assured. "He is a typical Burmese hunter; they never give up."

I wondered why Hla Din had refrained from crossing the creek although by the look of it it could not be deep. I asked Burn.

"That's the Reserve boundary, that's why," Burn ex-

plained. "It runs all the way along the creek to that point." His arm swept over to where the jungle met the sea. "That's where their village is, another kitchenmidden like the one we saw this morning."

"How do they cross that creek? Do they carry a canoe wherever they go?"

"Jarwas don't use canoes. They use rafts. They make them on the spot by tying together some brushwood. But here at this point they don't use anything, for the bay is shallow. They wade across it at ebb." He added, "At one time this bay constituted a part of their highway until we stopped it by setting up this outpost. We want them to give up Rutland and move their habitation up north, for the area south of here has been cleared and the settlers must be protected from their maraudings."

After lunch we went for a stroll. The tide was at its lowest and new sandbars had arisen on which scores of snipe and curlew fed. It was lovely to feel the velvety sand underfoot and watch molluscs of various colourings and shapes going about their business. But I disliked the young mangroves, patches of which grew on the shore, for their spiderleg roots hurt our feet and threatened to trip us up.

"See how mangroves grow?" Burn said, picking up a seedpod more than a foot long. "They drop from the branches and sink nearly half their length at the first impact. Once stuck the sea cannot dislodge them. Notice also the angle at which they grow, always seaward. But for the mangrove the sea would have overrun the Andamans long ago."

Except for the occasional quacking of the teal and the gentle murmur of the water Constance Bay had been in a state of stillness all that afternoon. Now and again we heard the crack of Hla Din's rifle but that only helped to punctuate the natural silence. As we rounded a mangrove patch we saw him coming, a picture of bedraggledness, nevertheless a brace of imperial pigeon dangling from his hand. He passed us without uttering a word, he was so tired. Burn chuckled, "What did I tell you? He will kill himself but he must get his bag. Well, those birds will do nicely for our supper."

Andaman weather is extremely unpredictable. All that morning and afternoon we had experienced nothing but brilliant sunshine, but now when we were scarcely two hundred yards from the outpost nimbuses came over and hid the sun.

"It's going to rain, I can see," Burn said, turning around, adding, "We had better run for it."

And we ran as fast as we could, and even then a few drops caught us before we gained the shelter of the hut.

It was not a long downpour, but intense, the drops, as big as marbles, striking the sand hard. When it was over Burn asked Hla Din to get the dugout ready so we could immediately return to Tirur. "Once it starts raining there is no telling how long it will go on," he said. "Moreover, the current in the stream gets too strong. We lost two boys last year when they tried to swim across this stream while it was raining."

In the evening light the mangrove forest looked even more fear-inspiring, and the white cranes witch-like as they flew from tree to tree. Our dugout chugged nervously through that eerie silence and uttered a cough of relief when she dived at last into the beachhead bank.

As the crow flies Tirur could be scarcely two miles from Constance Bay, yet what a contrast there was in the scenery. There was not a hint of the sea here, but a perfectly land-locked valley meeting in a point between two hills. The hills were heavily covered but the valley itself was cultivated, squares and squares of paddyfields through which cattle were winding their way to the farmsteads on the edges.

"Until eight years ago this valley was a part of the forest," Burn said as we trudged over the stubbly footpath. "It was cleared to settle refugees from East Pakistan. The Jarwas gave us a lot of trouble in those days. At sundown parties of them would converge on this place, sit out the night in the neighbouring shrubbery and attack at dawn. Their attacks became so frequent and the settlers were so panic-stricken that the Administration had to do something. That's when the Bush Police started. The first outpost was established in this valley."

Beyond the farmsteads the footpath skirted the foot of the hill. The sun had gone down and the valley was swathed in twilight, and it was difficult to pick one's way on that rugged route pitted with innumerable gulleys. But it was not long before we were in the Tirur outpost walking between a row of huts lit by lanterns.

Greetings began to fly at Burn, including some from women and children, as we entered the habitation, while dogs barked and disturbed chickens cackled madly. I liked the atmosphere of the place; it was a real Indian village at eventide, with all the familiar sights and sounds. Nevertheless I could not help wondering how women and children were allowed to live here considering the Jarwa border was only a few miles away. I asked Burn.

"This place is fairly safe now, so we can afford to post our married policemen here," Burn replied. "But at Constance Bay, you must have noticed, there were no women and children. We post only single men there. That place is too exposed."

Burn's hut—he had a special hut of his own—was last in the row, a Burmese-style structure of criss-crossed bamboo walling with a raised L-shaped platform as the living quarters on which our luggage had been piled. However, we sat out in deck chairs in the open space before it with a low Burmese table between us. Hardly had we slumped down than a tray of tea arrived, and in its wake Tobo—Burmese for "Lord of the Jungle"—an affectionate mongrel who settled down regally at Burn's feet.

Life had been pretty busy for me at Port Blair, and I found the peace of Tirur relaxing. The valley here had narrowed to about a hundred feet across and the trilling of insects from the neighbouring bushes sounded musical. Evenings come soothingly to the Andamans, first the sun went down in a golden glow, then came a shy and silent twilight, followed by the smooth velvety darkness of the night. The temperature too had fallen, but, being a valley the breeze was shut out, so by and by I discarded my garments until only the khaki shorts remained. This state of partial nudity was a temporary comfort, however, for soon I was bitten all over.

"There seem to be a lot of mosquitoes about," I complained, scratching myself savagely.

"Those are sandflies," Burn corrected. "This is the time when those pests rise. Only smoke drives them away." He called out to the lads to light a fire and once it started to smoulder the biting ceased.

Tobo was a lovely dog, white and shaggy, and acted his part as the Lord of the Jungle very well. With Burn he was meek and obedient, but the Bush Police lads he treated with high condescension. When they called him into the hut to have his milk, he disregarded them completely, and the plate had to be brought out to where he sat. When he drank the milk it was with the slow, deliberate motions of his tongue. But he disdained to lick round the plate when it was gone.

That naturally drew the other mongrels to the scene, but they had only to step inside the fence than Tobo, growling fiercely, would set upon them. However, once the chastisement was over he would return to Burn, caring not a bit if afterwards the same mongrels came and nosed in his plate, for his one purpose seemed to be to make known who was the master around here.

Tobo, we noticed, was a good watchdog. For some time past we had been hearing suspicious noises from the neck of the valley and he had listened to them with keen attention. He did not budge, however, while they sounded only like some muffled footfalls, but when there was a crash he leaped up, and took off at great speed, barking fiercely as he went. Apparently he had disturbed a monster, for soon we could hear the sound of a big, heavy object hurtling in our direction. On and on it came without a pause, and as it approached our hut the other mongrels joined in the fray. And just as we were wondering what it could be all about a panic-stricken buffalo collided with our fence. The fence was made of barbed wire and nailed to heavy poles, but that did not slow down the beast; he carried on pell-mell until his galloping sounds died away in the direction of the settlers' huts. Apparently the buffalo belonged to one of the local herds and had dawdled a little too long on his way home, forgetting that Andaman mongrels are aggressive creatures and become extra

(Right) While passing along the Jarwa highway in the neighbourhood of Tirur, Bush Police help me across a log bridge



(Below) Myself (in T-shirt and dark shorts) watching as the dinghy is being got ready to leave Colinpur for the Tirur beach-head





An Onghie couple. 'Tree' and his wife, 'A Little Piece of Rag'

pugnacious after dark. When all was over the dogs came back to us happily wagging their tails, Tobo foremost among them, demanding a rewarding pat.

The scrimmage had provided us with a spot of thrill, but it also put a few ideas into my head. We were seated only a dozen paces from the hut and I had observed that it was made entirely of bamboo without even a nail to hold it together. Could such a structure be considered safe enough against an attack?

"Tell me, Burn," I said. "I know there is going to be no Jarwa raid tonight, but am I to believe these flimsy walls can withstand their spears?"

"Yes, they can," he assured, and went in to fetch his dhau made out of an old bayonet blade. Holding it like a professional knife-thrower he stood next to his chair and hurled it forcefully at the hut. The knife flew at the wall, faltered against it and fell down. Burn threw it a second time, and again the same thing happened.

"Come over," he said, and showed me how the wall was made, split bamboo lengths woven one into the other check pattern, giving the seemingly flimsy sheet the strength and texture of plywood. "Only a bullet can go through this," he said, tapping on it, "and luckily Jarwas don't know how to use firearms."

The sleep that came to me that night was heavy but enjoyable, the resilient bamboo flooring on which we spread out feeling as comfortable as a spring bed. The waking was accompanied by birds calling from the hills, first parrots, then pigeons. Then came the climax, a hot pot of tea placed before me by Burn's batman Alvis. In what more ideal circumstances could a morning dawn?

Our mission that morning was to visit the outpost whose members had encountered the Jarwa hunting party. Mind you, Joseph had told us more or less what had happened, and we were going there merely to check up, but I welcomed the opportunity since most of our way lay along the Jarwa boundary. It was a bright sunlit morning, and since the outpost was only four miles away we hoped to be back by lunch time.

Soon after breakfast, consisting of the usual hard-boiled eggs and tea, we started. The path ran over the steep hill behind, a narrow zigzag between high trees, and I was practically out of breath by the time we reached the next outpost which was on the other side of the hill. From the historical point of view this place was notable, being the first Bush Police outpost to be established, but to look at it was nothing different to what I had seen at Constance Bay, bamboo huts with raised platforms. Its situation was noticeable, however; it was some way up the hill and commanded an excellent view of the valley.

Pointing to the place where the valley narrowed, Burn said, "Can you see that the soil there is scarred by burns? That's where the Jarwas claimed their last victim. A hut stood there. The farmer had gone to Port Blair for some work and only his wife and child were at home. The woman came out in the morning to wash her face when the savages attacked. The frightened woman ran back into the hut, but not before an arrow had gone through her shoulder. Hastily picking up her child she ran for shelter to the next hut, but its occupants seeing the Jarwas still coming on themselves took to their heels. Soon panic spread in the valley and everybody fled to Conlinpur. Luckily the Jarwas did not follow them, otherwise we can't say what would have happened. Instead they proceeded to burn down the huts."

"Why didn't the settlers team up to face the attack?"

"These valleys are small. We can't settle more than four or five families in each. It was sensible that they ran away, for the savages would have outnumbered them."

"What happened to the woman?"

"She died in the hospital at Port Blair. It was after that incident that the outpost was established. Mind you, the raids continued for some time, but the police could easily repel them. You see, the savages were particularly resentful because this area lies close to their highway."

"How far is it?"

"In the bushes beyond. That's where we are going."

Three armed policemen joined us including the man with the sten gun. The jungle began immediately behind the

cleared ground and was so high I had to throw back my neck to look at the trees. The shrubbery too was dense, all manner of ferns, mosses and vines woven together, and we had to stick to the narrow footpath and walk in single file.

"Is this the highway you mentioned?" I asked Burn who was walking ahead of me.

"Yes."

"It should be easy to intercept the savages here."

"In normal circumstances, yes, but not when they are up to mischief. Then they infiltrate through the shrubbery following behind their leader who twists a leaf here or a branch there to indicate which way he has gone. That sort of march can be accomplished noiselessly, almost unnoticeably."

The path crossed a deep gully running down from the ridge. Burn pointed at it and said, "That's where the raiders sat out the night. They spread leaves on the floor and squatted on them. Jarwas are naked people so I suppose they need something to sit on."

This path was really something. Not only was it narrow, and the ground underfoot slippery and wet, now and again we came upon whole boles of trees lying across it. The boles were so massive we had to climb up them to get to the other side.

"These boles are traps for our boys," Burn went on. "Before an attack Jarwas bury ray-fish bones at the foot of them. When a person is in a hurry he doesn't see what he is stepping upon, and if it happens to be a ray-fish bone, well, he has had it. It's like a comb with barbed teeth. Once it gets inside the flesh it can't be removed without an operation. Two of our lads were injured that way."

We went two miles like that, through this, one of the hardest jungles I have ever been in. It was real difficult terrain. Dew dripped on us from the overhead foliage, and leeches galore fastened to our legs. These creatures were tiny dots to begin with, and we wouldn't know they were there until they bulged like cysts from our skins. How many I pulled off that morning! What was worse they left open wounds that itched.

The path had gone uphill most of the time, but we hadn't felt the strain because the climb had been gradual. Now we came to a part where it went down, skirting close beside a gorge through which a stream ran. We followed it for about a hundred paces when trees suddenly ceased to grow and we found ourselves in a big rocky glade bounded on the hillward side by a steep rising stone over which a cascade fell.

It felt wonderful to have the sun on us again, and I suggested to Burn that we should have a breather. He agreed, but we did not sit down until the man with the sten gun jumped up on a boulder and stood at the ready while the other two policemen poked into the surrounding bushes with their rifles and declared the place safe.

"Just a normal precaution," Burn said, slumping down and extracting his pipe from his pocket. "This is tribal territory where no law operates. We have to take care of our own lives."

The rugged beauty of the glade was indeed breathtaking. All manner of flowering creepers grew on the floor of the forest, and here and there were orchids wound around boles of trees. The jungle itself was a splash of colour, various shades of green superimposed by daubs of yellow, ochre and purple of the new foliage. The cascade had a picture postcard quality about it, a bluish jet of water foaming into a hollowed-out pool below, and the water so clear we could see the black fine sand at its bottom. This was an ideal spot for a picnic where one could laze, sport and relax. What a pity it was in the Jarwa Reserve and not outside it.

Burn patted the rock on which we were sitting. "One theory is," he said, lighting his pipe, "that the Andamans are the southern portion of Burma's Arakan mountains. In the dim and distant past a huge earthquake submerged this area and created the Bay of Bengal. The Andamans stood out because they were the highest part of the submerged mountain chain. I'm not a geologist but when you look at clean rock like this in the middle of a big sea you begin to wonder if that theory can't be true." He knotted his hands in front of his crossed knees. "Look at the trees and how they grow. They have learnt to live on rock, that is why they have those huge

buttresses to support their trunks. Whatever the truth one fact is certain, the Andamans are not coral islands, they have a firm rock foundation."

The remark was typical of Burn. He spoke rarely in such a vein, but when he did one listened attentively, for then he sounded like a man who has thought a lot.

"Anthropologists claim that the Jarwas belong to the Stone Age," he went on. "When you look at this rock carefully you can discern the similarity between the two. They resemble the rock in every respect, the blackness, the hardness, and the unthinkingness. I don't blame the Jarwas for what they are doing. That's as far as their thinking can carry them. It isn't that they are hostile to us, they have just not learnt to trust anyone else but themselves."

The sun was so bright it lit up every object in the glade and Burn unfolded his camera and took some pictures. But by the time he had finished and the camera had been packed black clouds came racing over to fill the sky. Smelling the damp wind that had begun to blow, Burn said, "I'm afraid the rain is upon us. Shall we carry on, or shall we return?"

I was getting acquainted with the vagaries of Andaman weather, there was no telling when clouds would blow over and when the sun would shine. But whenever it showed uncertainty like this it was best to retreat to a shelter for the rains that followed were usually heavy.

"I was so hoping to see Jarwas," I said to Burn, full of disappointment.

Burn could not help laughing. "I've spent ten years in these forests and have seen them only twice, Mr. Vaidya. It would be a real spot of luck if you saw them during your trip."

I agreed that under the circumstances it would be safer to return and Burn felt that I had come to a sensible decision. "There is still a mile and a half to go to the next outpost and the terrain ahead becomes difficult in weather like this."

So the party turned back. As before the armed police led the way, but they took a different route. This skirted around the foot of the next hill and was full of obstructions, but we preferred it because it cut the distance to our hut by half. As we went along the wind became sharp, and in the last

stages it started to thunder. We reached our hut just before the deluge began.

The rain fell and fell, literally flooding the valley and the ground under our hut became a big pool. After lunch, however, the sky cleared and we promptly broke camp. By the time we reached the beachhead the sun was out, and since the police truck to carry us back was not expected to be in Conlinpur until six o'clock we decided to spend the meanwhile at Constance Bay hoping to do some photography. But the weather had become perfectly freakish; by the time we were at Constance Bay a steady drizzle set in confining us strictly to the hut.

Round about five o'clock the drizzle stopped and a lull came over, and we left immediately, Hla Din and the two policemen by the dugout carrying our luggage, while Burn and I walked along the Japanese road which runs along the shore. During their occupation the Japanese had set up an outpost here to repel Allied landings from the sea, and this road was built to carry supplies to it. However, since the war it had fallen into disuse and in many places its surface had disintegrated. Burn calculated that the hike would take us half an hour, but there were so many puddles we had to wade through that it took us easily twice that time. The truck was already waiting for us when we reached Conlinpur, and two hours later the lights of Port Blair were winking at us.

CHAPTER SIX

LIVING OFF THE LAND

A FORTNIGHT later Burn rang me up. "Sorry to tell you, but the incoming boat from the mainland hasn't brought any fuel for *Cholunga*, so I suppose our *Nilkamal* will have to go on holding the fort." Then without waiting to hear my reaction, he added, "I've planned a four-day excursion to Tirur. Would you care to come along?"

I agreed instantly. I loved the place.

We started after lunch. By the time we were at the beach-head the sun was low over the western hill. At the outpost a covey of bulbuls twittered by, flying to the jungle with a great to do. I had never seen so big a flight of bulbuls before, nor behaving so boisterously, but that was perhaps due to the fact that the birds' mating season had begun. Tobo met us at the gate and patronizingly guided us to where the chairs had been laid out.

The air was balmy, the scenery relaxing, and the supper, a special Burmese meal cooked by Hla Din's wife, enjoyable but heavy. That made me sleepy and I decided to retire early leaving Burn to browse in a thriller I had given him. On entering the hut I found that "old man" Aung Thein, so called because of his perpetually serious face, was down on his knees praying before a cheap picture of Buddha on the very place where our beds should have been spread. I quietly walked out and told Burn what was happening.

Burn put down the thriller and laughed. "Let him finish his prayer," he advised. "He is a funny fellow."

"Do you have funny fellows in your Force?" I bantered.

"This one is. He is what you might call an eccentric; gets excited over paltry things. Once he cut his wrist because the wood he was chopping wouldn't split. On another occasion he shot at his colleagues because they wouldn't wake up in the morning when he called. He had to do a stretch for that.

It was while he was serving his sentence that he formed this habit of praying. I never disturb him because that eases his mind."

"Didn't his sentence go against his readmission to the Force?"

"A conviction is no bar to employment in these islands. Besides, we have a free hand in whom we choose as our recruits, and that is due to the fact that our needs are so special. You see, we don't want men who can drill well and look spick and span. We want tough fellows who can stand a rough life. Above all they must feel at home in the jungle and must also know how to extract a part of their living from it. That is why we prefer Ranchis. They are a hillfolk from Bihar State. Ranchis and Burmese fill our bill well, for that is the sort of life they are used to in their native tracts."

By the time old man Aung Thein had finished, my sleepiness had gone. My mind was filled with thoughts about this peculiar Police Force I was living with. How long would their need be felt? Answer to that naturally depended upon the Jarwas, and considering the uncompromising attitude they had adopted it seemed the Bush Police would have to operate for a long time to come.

"It seems incredible that there can be human beings who abhor others because they also happen to be human beings," I said. "Has there been no instance ever of the Bush Police having made contact with the Jarwas without having to growl at each other?"

Burn put down the thriller for good. "We have come face to face with them without engaging in a skirmish, but that does not mean that the Jarwas have ceased to be hostile. Our experience indicates that they don't want to be friendly, are opposed to the very idea of it. Once, out of desperation, the Administration tried to force their friendship upon them, but the experiment misfired. It happened like this. While cruising along the coast in a dinghy the police came upon two Jarwas swimming. By switching off their engine, and rowing noiselessly between them and the beach to cut off their retreat, the police managed to capture them. The captives were taken to Port Blair and placed in a hospital ward where they were given

extra special treatment. In the meanwhile the anthropologists tried to learn their language, so that when they could speak it enough they would be able to tell the savages we harboured no evil intentions towards their tribe and actually wanted to extend our hand of friendship. The intention was to release the captives in the jungle afterwards so they would go and tell the others what was on our minds. But before the plan could mature the rascals escaped, no one knows how, for their ward was well-guarded. Well, that was that. As a matter of fact we have reasons to believe that the savages dislike any sort of overtures from us. They even resent their own people who accept favours from our boys."

"Have you concrete evidence to prove that?"

"Yes. Once, after a raid, the police chased the savages back to their village. As usual everyone had fled the place except a woman who couldn't because of her three little children. Just to show their *bonhomie* the police party took the woman to their post and after giving her a good meal, sent her back. Imagine their surprise when a few days later they came upon this same woman wandering aimlessly in the jungle with her children. Believing she had lost her way, they tried to lead her back to the village, but the woman refused to go near the place. Putting two and two together they came to the conclusion that the tribe had turned her out. So they took her and her children to Port Blair. The woman was very unhappy though, she moped and moped, and died a few months later, poor thing. Her children were given to Bishop Richardson of Car Nicobar to look after. They are grown up now."

"By what you say the Jarwas do seem a mean lot. But are you sure their attitude is not due to our own misbehaviour in the past? Was there any incident that could have made them distrust us for ever?"

"Once maybe, but not without provocation. The savages had become extra truculent so the Administration had to bring in a company of Burma Rifles to deal with them. They surrounded the village and shot up every Jarwa who showed himself. But that happened more than fifty years ago. Other than that I know of no incident when they were dealt with

with severity." He let out a big yawn. "I'm tired," he said. "What about bed?"

The following morning we went to Constance Bay to do a spot of turtle-hunting. The sun was shining brightly when we reached there. The Bush Police lads were busy unloading a raft of newly-cut bamboo, but when they spotted our dinghy three of them, Benedict, Subramaniam and Maria, came over to help us beach. Apparently the trio, the outpost's turtle-hunting experts, had been waiting for us, for hurriedly gathering their tackle consisting of a long bamboo pole and some coils of rope with harpoon heads attached, they jumped into their own dugout and started for the bay. We followed them.

The incoming tide was making our crafts fret like frisky foals, but that did not deter the lads from taking up their hunting positions, Benedict atop the flat prow with the harpoon-fixed pole in hand, Subramaniam behind him with a coil of rope, and Maria rowing in the stern according to Benedict's muttered instructions.

As in all other forms of hunting in turtle-hunting too the element of luck plays its part. We began in the west where the creatures drift in with the incoming tide from the open sea, but finding none moved north, then south, then to the centre. The perambulation, executed slowly to enable the lads to make a thorough search, must have tired out Benedict, bent as he was looking concentratedly at the water, and also Burn who stood stiff in the hull with a camera against his chest, as he was keen on taking pictures of the event. "Last time we went out we saw turtles from the start," Burn said sourly, "but you know, a watched pot never boils." And the words were hardly out of his mouth when Benedict waved to Maria to halt and the pole hit the water. However, we were not in luck yet, for the pole came up without anything.

"Missed him by inches," Benedict groaned, fixing the harpoon head firmly.

"Row back to the shallower parts; you have some chance of striking there," Hla Din advised.

We turned east. The tide was about half-way up, and being near full moon, was running strong. Our crafts were kicking

like donkeys, taking the current on their sterns, but that made no difference to the postures of the lads who stood immobile like statues. Then, before anyone could say Jack Robinson, Benedict's body arched and straightened like a bow as the pole stabbed the water.

The first hint that the harpoon had gone home came from the rope in Subramaniam's hand; it paid out rapidly. When the last yard had sung away the dugout began to be dragged. On and on it went with Subramaniam vainly trying to brake it by straining hard at the rope. When at last the craft stopped some three hundred yards farther Benedict, who had meanwhile inserted a fresh harpoon head in the pole, struck again. Another mad rush, but thank heaven this time it was short. Eventually the craft circled to a standstill, the lads took in the rope, and when all of it had been drawn in, leaned over and rummaged in the water with their hands. Slowly the turtle came up, the hind flippers first, then the body with the harpoon heads pierced right through the shell. He must have been some weight, that giant, as big as a gateleg table, for the lads had to struggle hard to drag him up, and when eventually they slid him down into the hull, they flopped down breathless.

Burn had been clicking away at his camera all through the incident, and when, after regaining their strength, the lads sat up, he called out, sounding thoroughly heartless, "You'll have to catch another one, Benedict. You were too fast with the harpooning; I couldn't get a picture."

The lads nodded weakly.

We had found our prey in the eastern part of the bay, but without our realizing it it had carried us to the west towards deeper waters. So back we went to our original position beyond the two big rocks that formed more or less the centre of the lake. The weather did much to restore our energy, a bright but not hot sun, a restless but not choppy sea, and a wind that was fast but exhilarating.

Luck, too, seemed to have changed in our favour, for now we saw turtles coming up to the surface of their own accord. They would pop out their heads, drift like logs for a few moments, and then sink. Benedict was gazing intently into

the water and when the pole went up to strike, Burn suddenly called out, "Wait. Let me come near." Now something else happened; as Hla Din tried to steer the dinghy the outboard gave out, and no amount of coaxing would make it go. Benedict held his stance for some time, but finding us immobile, relaxed. Realizing that there was something radically wrong with the engine Burn too slumped down, muttering dejectedly, "It would happen at a time like this." Then irritably to Hla Din, "I told you to bring the spare outboard. But you are so obstinate." Without a word Hla Din buckled down to the laborious task of taking the engine apart. He extracted some discs, blew on them, and putting them together, pulled the whipcord. The engine responded.

We were now seeing turtles to our hearts' content, they were everywhere. Benedict seemed hardly pleased with the spectacle though, for when we asked him why he wasn't taking advantage of the situation, he grumbled, "These floating animals are no good to me. I have to have them down on the bed to put in the harpoon." He got his chance at last, the dugout came to a halt, and the pole struck with force and alacrity.

"Got it! Got it this time!" It was Burn shouting, mad with joy at having obtained the picture of a lifetime.

We too shared in his exultation, but meanwhile the dugout was haring away in a westerly direction; harpooned turtles, we noticed, always rushed towards the sea to escape. On and on it went dragged helplessly, uncontrollably, until once more we were well past the two big rocks. It was quite an effort to keep pace with the craft, and when at last we were abreast of it, there was Benedict standing despondently in the prow, moaning that the water was too deep for his pole. Subramaniam tried to help, endeavouring to shift the creature to shallower parts by giving the rope some vicious tugs, but the turtle would not move. We felt so impotent! As a last resort Hla Din suggested that the rope be handed over to us so we could take it in tow and move the creature eastward, but before anything could be done Benedict dived headlong into the water. For a long minute we lost sight of him, and were beginning to doubt the wisdom of his action

when up he bobbed holding the turtle like a shield. We could see that he was having a mighty struggle, for the turtle was doing his best to shake him off. Nevertheless, holding tenaciously, he pushed and shoved the animal towards the dugout until Subramaniam and Maria could lean over and give him a helping hand. Together they seized the creature and with an herculean effort lifted him right out of the water and dropped him into the hull like a sack. This animal was even bigger than the first, and since the hull's width could not contain him, his head came to rest over the side, the jaws opening and shutting like the gasps of an asthmatic.

This last hunt was so spectacular, and telescoped, even we felt exhausted. We sat still for a while, and when rested decided that that was enough turtle hunting for one morning. To be on the water for three hours sitting straight and tense isn't good for one's back, and since Hla Din also felt that the meat from the two animals would be enough to go round at Constance Bay and Tirur we decided to return, but in separate directions, for the Sergeant had his own plans. His eyes were now focused on the teal which had settled in the eastern estuary of the bay, and he intended to avenge himself on them with a shotgun for giving him the slip on the previous occasion. And so as our dinghy nosed eastward, he told the lads to return with the turtles to the outpost.

It was about a mile to the eastern rim of the bay but with the tide behind us we covered that distance in five minutes. The dinghy did not go near where the teal lay but a good five hundred yards to the south so as not to alarm the birds. Leaving us in charge of it he waded out on to the beach and then disappeared into the pendanus jungle behind. We did not hear or see him until a quarter of an hour later when a shot rang out and the teal rose helter-skelter leaving two of themselves behind. In flight the birds made a wonderful sight, varicoloured buntings fluttering against a polished sky, but they did not go far, after a circle or two they descended on the estuary again. Instantly Hla Din let go a second time, making the birds rise, but believe it or not they again returned. A third shot, a lot of cackle in the air, and back go the birds to be slaughtered some more. This was according to Hla

Din's plan. He knew duck cannot fly a long distance when the sun is blazing hot, and furthermore it being full tide there were no sandbars for them to take shelter on. So helplessly they returned to the estuary again and again, providing an easy target for our Sergeant. When at last the shooting stopped, it was because Hla Din had run out of ammunition, he could muster only a dozen rounds for the morning's shoot. Burn and I counted the birds, fourteen in all, a creditable show for half an hour.

We helped him gather his bag, collecting those that had fallen close to the shore, but the birds that had drifted into deeper water he had to fetch himself which he did by swimming out with all his clothes on, he was so elated.

One bird proved difficult, however, and took a long time to retrieve. Being injured it could not fly, but it had sufficient strength left to keep swimming. Once, by a superhuman effort, Hla Din managed to get near it, but the creature dodged him by ducking and staying under water for a long time. That catch-me-if-you-can game would have gone on all the afternoon had not a third and most unpremeditated factor intervened; a koestrel appeared on the scene and made covetous dives to pick up some ready-made food. The bird dodged the koestrel too, but the situation was obviously critical and Hla Din had to think and act fast. He did. Without wasting time he returned to the shore, and seizing Burn's .22 fired at the intruder. The koestrel made a hasty retreat and a lucky shot also anchored the teal. When he came back to survey his achievement, the first words that came to his lips were, "Now you will have plenty of meat to eat in camp." A Burmese hunter indeed.

That afternoon the turtles were slaughtered, and a messier and crueller operation I have not seen. The species have some peculiar nervous system that makes them hang on to life longer than any other creature. The lads had beached them close beside the huts, and immobilized them by turning them over on their backs. We hated to see them wriggle pitifully in that broiling sun, so asked the lads to put them out of their misery quickly.

In the Andamans they believe that the only way a turtle's

life can be put out is by piercing its brain, so Benedict had thrust a big needle right through and across their eyes. Large blobs of blood had fallen on the sand below and yet the creatures seemed fully alive and were clawing the air with their flippers. As though the agony of being blinded was not enough mongrels harassed them by snapping at their exposed bellies and had constantly to be shooed away.

Benedict began by cutting the flesh along the shell with a sharp knife, but since its blade could not reach all the way up to the crown he hacked out large lumps and dumped them on a gunnysack. Soon the gunnycloth was piled high with red meat—it was all meat, for turtles have no bones—still the creatures refused to die. Even after the intestines had been severed from the body and discarded, the hearts kept on beating.

Back at Tirur, Alvis put all his skill into making soup for the night's supper, but I could not relish it. It wasn't that the sight of the slaughtering had put me off but the concoction smelt mossy and was far too rich. It seems turtle meat has to hang for a long time to make it smell-free, and must be boiled in several lots of water to reduce its fat content.

In one respect Hla Din's calculations about the distribution of turtle meat went wrong, the Constance Bay lads refused to keep any. They informed us that nobody at the outpost relished it, but that we found out was only an excuse. The truth was that Ranchis do not eat amphibian flesh for fear of losing their manliness. We deferred to their scruple, agreeing, as a measure of compensation, to accompany them on their meat hunt the following day.

Rounding up the mongrels for the hunt delayed our departure from Tirur the next morning. The Constance Bay lads had specifically asked us to bring along some since what they had by way of hunting dogs would not be enough for the thick jungle we intended to scour. The problem was not one of gathering enough canines as keeping back the unwanted ones. How many times we had to pelt them with stones and drive them back, and yet they marched with us to the beachhead just the same. The three we had selected, two dogs and a bitch, proved to be a nuisance as travelling

companions, they simply would not stay put in the shelter of lambapatti leaves constructed for them in the prow, but insisted on wandering all over the dinghy, dirtying our clothes.

With the onset of summer the islands' bird life was becoming increasingly interesting. All that morning I had sat watching a woodpecker picking worms from a rotting mohwa branch, and robins and bee-eaters hopped around it issuing their tweet-tweet calls. Doves and egrets were a common sight in Tirur, but the cuckoo I heard for the first time. He called all that night from the hill to our north, and in the morning another began to answer him from the next valley. The most fascinating were two singing mynahs flirting on a silk cotton branch. They were so full of themselves, talking away and crossing their beaks, they hardly noticed our dinghy as it chugged below them.

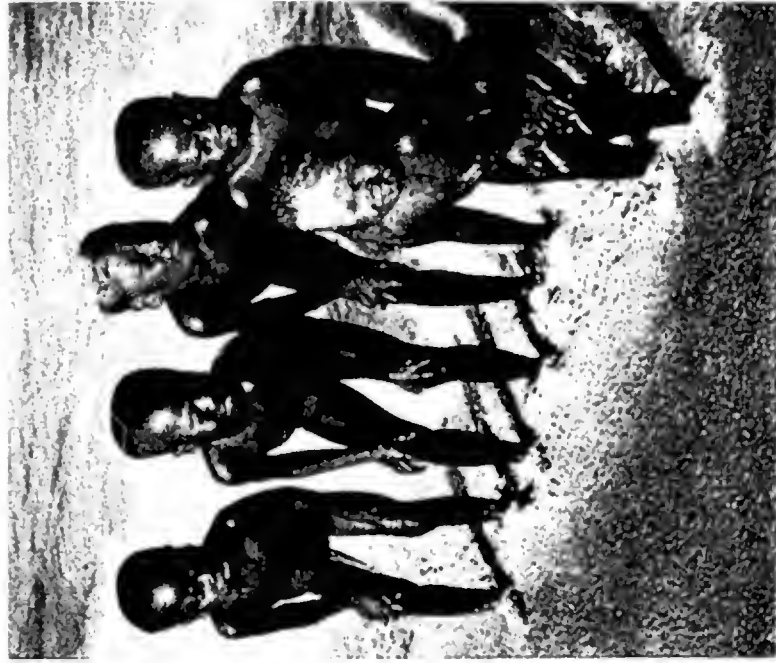
"Do you think your lads can procure a pair of these for me?" I said to Burn, pointing to the precious creatures whose natural home is south-east Asia.

"Ask me anything else you like," Burn said. "The local population don't know how to trap birds because they are not interested in them. Have you seen one single caged bird in Port Blair?"

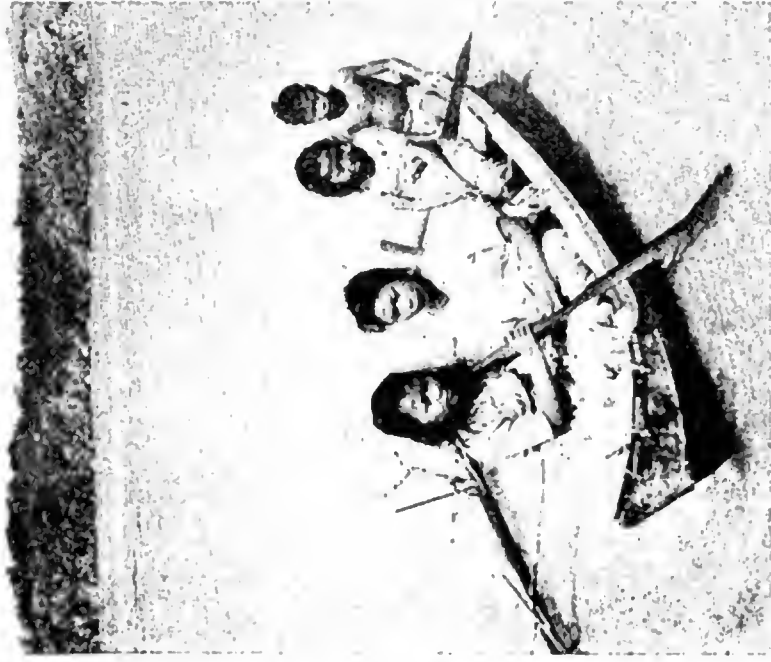
The prevailing opinion at Constance Bay was that since much of the morning was already gone we should postpone our hunt until the afternoon, for game takes shelter in sequestered spots during the hot hours of the day and is difficult to ferret out from the thick undergrowth. Thus we found ourselves left with two or three hours on hand and I asked Burn if it would not be a good idea to go swimming.

"Why not?" he said, full of enthusiasm. "Let's go to the Jarwa beach. It's nice there. Here in this bay the sand is muddy."

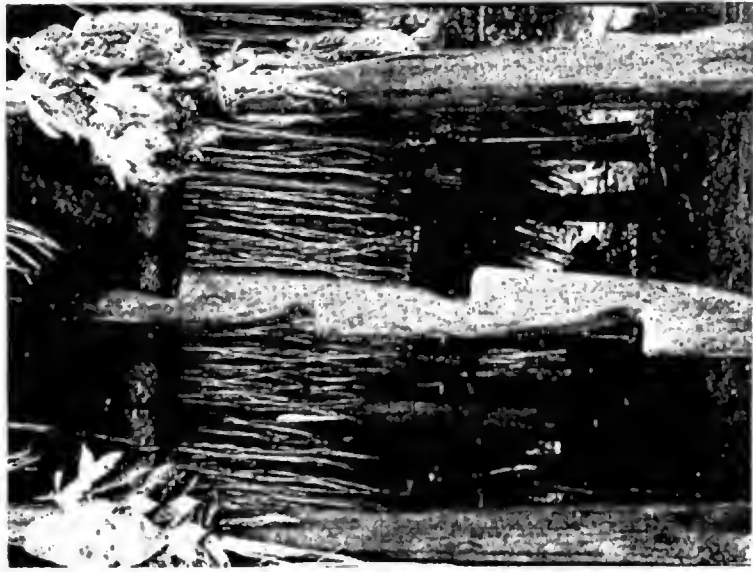
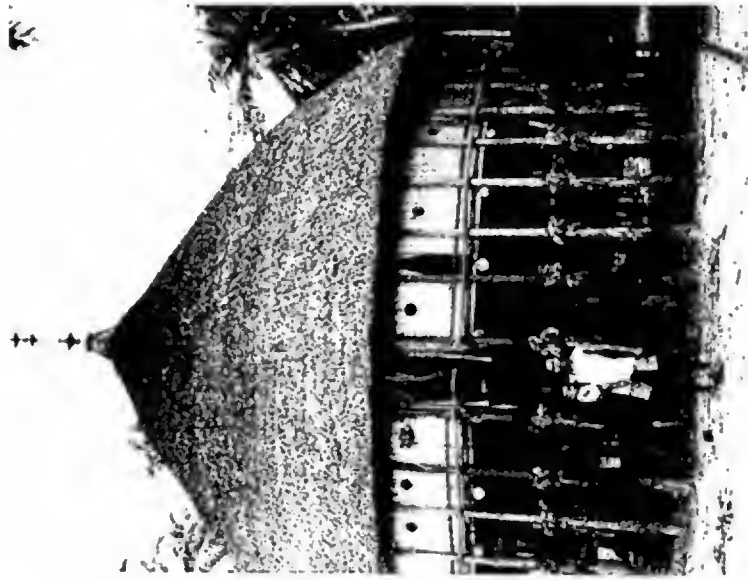
The Jarwa beach lay outside the northern claw of the bay. The tide was coming in and the wind was sharp, and their combined force made our dinghy dance a ridiculous rumba. Nevertheless, it was pleasant weather, and a little bird flew across our bow to prove it. He rose from the shrubbery on the two rocks in the centre of the bay and acrobating partly over the water and partly against the sky sailed in the direc-



Onghie kids in Little Andaman. A happier crowd of children I have never seen



A Nicobari family going out to gather food. Only women and children work in the Nicobars



The beehive hut we entered at Upper Katchall (*left*). We climbed up into the residence by means of the notched pole ladder (*right*)

tion of the coast. His manner was so gay and carefree I watched him enchanted. A moment later, its frolic ceased when a strong gust of wind rolled and pressed him down into the water. The spectacle was so tragic.

I remarked about it to Burn. He laughed at my sentimentality. "It's a tern," he said, "a strong and hardy bird. You will see, it will rise again." And true enough, a moment later the bird did come out to resume its flight, gay and playful as ever.

Near the reef the water was rough as thundering breakers hammered upon the submerged labyrinth of coral pouring gallons of water into our prow. Out in the open sea conditions became worse still, our dinghy rose and fell, rose and fell, not like a rocking horse, but something that is tossed up and drops with a thud and a splash. Thankfully we did not have to go far into it, for the Jarwa beach lay to our immediate right.

If the sea behind was fear-inspiring, the landscape in front took away all thought of it, a long, almost endless beach of white sand, banked by a laced forest in which several colours commingled, yellow, purple, red, ochre. The scene developed ethereal enchantment when deer rose from the shade of a bough and ambled back into the forest shaking their antlers in lazy contentment.

In a way I was sorry that I had not brought my rifle along, for the animals made a wonderful target, but in the sylvan setting in which I was seeing them the thought seemed misplaced, monstrous. But was it really? Wasn't the animals' fate sealed considering the route they took led to the Jarwa village?

But Burn had something incredible to say. "This Jarwa Reserve has become a good sanctuary for these animals," he said. "They breed there in plenty. And that is because the savages will not touch deer meat."

"That's strange," I said. "One expects a savage tribe to eat any animal whose meat is edible."

"Oh, no. The only meat Jarwas eat is of wild pig. That's perhaps because pigs are natives of these islands whereas the spotted deer were imported. A Forest officer brought four pairs of spotted deer from the mainland some fifty years ago,

but look how they have multiplied. Now there must be tens of thousands. They are a nuisance to farmers."

"Why don't you introduce a predator to keep their numbers down?"

"We tried out that some years ago, but it didn't work. A pair of leopards were released in these jungles, but no one knows what happened to them. We lost sight of the animals completely. The Jarwas may have killed them or they may have died a natural death. Now the Administration is reluctant to introduce predators because the valleys are being settled. They fear that if the creatures multiply like the deer did they will make life impossible for the settlers."

As we advanced landward the colour of the water changed, first to green, then to a shade of pastel grey, finally to the clarity of glycerine. It was so transparent we could see every grain of sand beneath, and where there were rocks the gentle tremulation of the barnacles and moss on them. We moored our dinghy about fifty feet from shore and I jumped in stripped to the skin, for in the suddenness of our departure I had left behind my swimming pants.

I swam for a while, then decided to laze, the environment induced that sort of abandon, to enjoy the sun on one's back, to feel the soft water around the body and dig playfully into the firm sand underfoot.

"Aren't you going to swim?" I asked Burn who was sitting in the boat, dreaming.

"No," he said smiling. "I'm getting too old for that sort of thing."

Actually he was not swimming because he too had forgotten to bring his swimming pants.

On the way back we again went by the rocks that fringed the coast, about thirty feet behind where the dinghy had been moored. Some of the rocks behaved strangely on this occasion; they swayed at our approach. One swayed so violently it shook itself free from its foundations and flew some twenty feet along the bottom of the sea, flapping its wings like a bird. When our boat gained on him he flapped his wings and raised a cloud of dust to hide his movements. What sort of rocks were these?

Burn had been watching the phenomenon with rapt attention. "What a good thing you got it when you did," he gasped. "That's a sting ray, an awfully dangerous fish."

More sting rays materialized. They sprang up all around us and winged away in haste. It seemed a whole colony of them had migrated to this part to feed on shells and molluscs which are plentiful here. It was obvious our outboard had disturbed them and they were trying to get out of our way. What astonished me were their sizes, the smallest was as big as a winnow, the biggest half the size of our dinghy, a real monster.

"How do they attack?" I asked Burn, for they, I noticed, had small mouths.

"They don't bite like sharks," Burn replied. "They lash out with their tail. It's a powerful blow and can cut a man's body into two. It's these tail bones that Jarwas bury in the path of their enemy."

Our hunt started out on the wrong foot. We were late in getting off, and for the same reason that had delayed us at Tirur that morning, namely all the brood of mongrels clamoured to come along, including the orange-sized puppies who were scarcely strong enough to run. It was a job keeping back the unwanted dogs. With the addition of five more lads from the outpost the dinghy was packed to capacity, and into this cramped space the mongrels, now seven all told, wanted to wander at will. The worst offender was a black bitch; she insisted on making overtures to a tawny dog by licking his lips, and when he shifted away to avoid her, she followed, and the other dogs trailed in her wake. Their behaviour was annoying—these mongrels seemed to have perpetually dirty feet—but we put up with the nuisance without complaint because hunting in the Andaman jungles is inconceivable without their help, only they can flush its thick undergrowth.

Our destination was a small island between the creek where we had shot teal the previous morning and the one winding south of it. The tide being at ebb, numerous sandbars had arisen compelling us to make a big circuit to reach the mangrove bank that rimmed it. Tying our dinghy to one of the trees we proceeded warily over the labyrinth of mangrove

roots to avoid wading through the swamp underneath. What amazed me was that the dogs did the same, but so much quicker, by the time we were across the swamp they were already in the jungle.

Two years ago this island was regarded as neutral territory, forbidden both to Jarwas and the settlers alike, until the former's misbehaviour compelled the Bush Police to encompass it in their beat. Two Burmans who had come to poach here found that their dog was missing. After a long search they came upon it lying prostrate in a clearing whining pitifully as a party of Jarwas pumped arrows into its body. Incensed by the sight of the wanton cruelty the owner of the dog advanced upon the savages to remonstrate, while his companion sneaked back to call the Bush Police. When the Bush Police arrived it was too late, the man and the dog were already dead, scored all over with spears. "After that incident we had no alternative but to press the Jarwas back into their Reserve," Burn concluded.

The jungle was rank, and the only paths in it were game-paths. Most of the time we walked minding our heads, hands and feet, for not only did the shrubbery press from all sides, it had thorns including the stinging ones of cane creepers. Occasionally we came upon places where the shrubbery formed an impenetrable wall, and the lads had to cut holes in them to make a passageway. To cap it almost everywhere were ups and downs, the ups as high as two-storey houses.

In the jungle the dogs took their own separate course while we kept our ears open to listen for their barking. That's how hunting is done in the Andamans. The canines wander off on their own, often singly, nosing into every bush, and when they locate a quarry, howl to gather the brood. The brood surrounds the animal and keeps it at bay until the hunter arrives. Then they widen the circle to enable the hunter to take aim and fire. They make the whole thing as easy as shooting at a sitting bird.

An hour's ramble and I was knocked out, the terrain was so trying. When we came to a clearing I sank down, exhausted.

"Burn," I said, "let us return as soon as we can, for I'm thirsty. I forgot to bring my water-bottle."

Burn thought awhile. "Let's see if we can procure some local fluid for you," he said, looking around.

"No thanks," I said aghast. "I won't touch a drop from here. I know what it is to suffer from dysentery."

"It will be cleaner than the most chlorinated water you can get in the city," he assured. Then turning to Hla Din he said something in Burmese.

Hla Din had been busy taking fruitless aims at imperial pigeon, but hearing Burn he unfastened his dhau and severed a long piece of wild cane festooned between two trees. Burn held it aloft like a mast and asked me to hold my mouth under it, and there flowed through the stick perfectly good liquid that had slight acidic taste. Four or five swallows of that, and my thirst was quenched.

"In Burma we call this 'lifesaver'," Burn said, throwing away the pole.

I was intrigued by this jungle mystery. "Any wild cane gives out water? Or is there a special variety?" I inquired.

"Any. That length of cane you drank from gives about a glassful."

The island was only about a hundred acres in size, and judging by the time we had spent on it we must have covered its entire area, and yet in all that while the dogs barked only once, and it had proved to be a false alarm. Why was there no game considering in the ordinary course the island was supposed to contain a sounder of pigs and a goodly herd of deer?

A little hole in the glade disclosed the reason. Benedict looked hard at it, and shaking his head despondently, said, "How can we expect to find animals here when the only waterhole in the place has dried up?"

It was past five o'clock and daylight was getting dim, so we decided to return without losing time for much of our way lay along the winding and often dark game-paths. The lads showed no disappointment at our lack of luck, and that was perhaps because a hunting trip to them is such a routine affair, no more exciting than gathering vegetables from a garden.

The dinghy was once more crowded with men and dogs,

and Hla Din was about to loosen the mooring rope when it was discovered that Napien, one of the mongrels we had brought from Tirur, was missing. Where could this swine—and that is what the name means in the Burmese language—have gone?

"Napien!" a lad called in that gloomy silence. There was no answering bark.

After a lapse of time more calls were sent out, but the dog remained unresponsive. When ten minutes passed that way we became restive not only over the safety of the dog but also on account of the oncoming darkness. "Let us leave him," Benedict said disgustedly. "If he wants to wander away let him come back on his own."

"How can he do that?" Burn objected. "His home is on the other side of the creek." Burn is a dog-lover.

"He can swim. Our dogs are used to swimming creeks."

"This creek is too wide. He will be drowned before he gets across. Fire off a round."

Joseph fired a round and the jungle echoed with crashing echoes. Any other Andaman mongrel would have come haring back hearing that sound, a shot to them represents the fall of an animal and tasty morsels of meat to follow. But Napien was different, he remained inaudible, invisible. Another shot, and still no sign of him!

Now we were really anxious. Light was getting so dim we heard fish plopping around the dinghy but could not see them.

Everyone was in favour of leaving Napien to his fate, except Burn. He insisted on staying on until the dog returned, and at his behest more shouts were yelled.

"Napien! Napien! Napien!"

Then the dogs in the dinghy did something that made our hearts miss a beat. They had sat meekly under the seats so far, but now they wriggled out of their niches and jumped upon the shore. Before we could fully grasp the situation they were beyond the swamp leaving the lads to call vainly after them. What had happened? Had the entire canine population decided upon truancy?

"Round them up before they disappear," someone advised.

"Round them up yourself. We can't see in this light," the others grumbled.

We sat dumbfounded, raging. This was going to be a memorable shoot; we had got no game and into the bargain lost our dogs, and dogs cost quite a penny in the Andamans, about a hundred rupees a pair for good hunters. Cupping his hands over his mouth, Benedict barked, "Come back, you bastards, or I'll shoot at you."

The dogs halted and turned back. They came in a close formation this time and leading the procession was that swine, Napien, the expression of a conquering hero on his face.

Hla Din unfastened the rope and quickly started the out-board, he did not want a repetition of the misadventure. Man and animal, both glad to be going back, sat quiet and still, except Napien. That rascal went from lad to lad, greeting them with his tongue hanging out. He deserved a spanking, but instead everyone cuddled him.

It was our last morning at Tirur, we were breaking camp that day. While the lads packed our stuff inside the hut I sat out in the open studying the forest on the hills. Trees grow high in the Andamans, anything from a hundred to two hundred feet, and that is because only that way can they avoid being strangled by the lower canopies of secondary growths and reach out to catch the lifegiving sunlight. Every now and then wind shook the trees filling the air with their seeds, the silk cotton fluffs floating like soap bubbles, the gurbons gyrating like helicopters, while the padauk seeds rolled on the ground like discs far away from the parent trees. That is how Nature prevents arboreal congestion in these thick forests.

The scene was alive with birds and insects. Pigeons sunned on branches and parrots called across the hills. A white stork came flying over and perched on a crest, flew off and perched on another, but still feeling diffident took off over the ridge in search of its familiar mangroves. The fields and meadows teemed with wild flowers, buttercups, daisies, dandelions, lilies, and butterflies fluttered over them, some small like buttons, others as big as books. All around was green, green,

green, except in the outpost where frangipanis grew. These leafless trees were weighed down with milk-white flowers and their fragrance filled the air. It was hard to leave Tirur.

Burn came over and said, "We are all ready to leave. We will dump our luggage at Conlinpur, and pick up the truck at Port Mouat later in the day. Let's spend the afternoon at Tarmugli. It's one of the two hundred islands that cluster around this coast."

The water in the creek was low, silk cotton seeds floating by us like dolls in crinoline, waltzing. Burn examined the receding ripples and said, "A boat seems to have gone ahead. Look at the bubbles." They lay in a long string. Round the bend we came upon their source, a canoe containing a sleepy Burman bent over a single fishing line.

"Caught anything?" Burn asked casually.

"One," the sleepy man moaned.

The lads at Constance Bay stood on the shore and waved to us, and the mongrels barked beside them. We waved back for we were not calling. The open sea was our destination.

In the bay the water began to rise and in the open sea it became so boisterous our dinghy had to charge through it like a stallion. That was uncomfortable for me for I was seated in the prow and was getting heavy sprays so I spread my raincoat over my legs. I wondered if using a small craft was sensible for this boisterous sea, but Burn said small crafts were the safest provided you took the precaution never to let the waves strike on your stern. "If you do that, the water pours in and then you are as good as lost," he added.

The sun was beautiful, and the wind exhilarating, and Hla Din was in his element handling the outboard. When the waves came high he slowed down, but in a calm spell he let go with a merry vengeance. I would have loved the ride had it not been for that finger-sized hole in the prow through which water was gushing in like a tap. Burn, Benedict, Alvis and I took turns to bale it out, but that gave only nominal relief, the flood would gather again and again. I kept looking hard for Tarmugli, praying we would reach there soon, but the island refused to enlarge beyond the size of a line.

And then the accident happened for the second time, the

outboard gave out, Hla Din pulled and pulled at the cord, and finally sank in the hull, despairing.

Burn could not resist grumbling, "I told you to bring the spare engine."

Maybe that would have saved the situation, but this was not the time to moan over it. Hla Din buckled down to the repairing job. He took the gadget apart, every bit of it. He wiped the washers, blew on the discs, cleaned the screws, and with Alvis's help, put the thing together. He pulled at the whipcord with force, but that had no effect. Meanwhile we realized that the tide was inexorably washing us away towards the Jarwa beach.

Now there was nothing for it but for the chief to take a hand. Burn tobogganed back into the stern, took charge, smeared his hands doing and undoing the parts, and put them together again. We watched with nervous apprehension as Hla Din pulled the cord, but there was no need to be pessimistic. The engine barked, and the dinghy leapt forward.

The sea was an enormous stage curtain blown up by the breeze and the waves looked like its frilled folds. I loved the view from my seat in the prow, but I simply could not tolerate the water at my feet; it had risen up to the ankles. When I drew Burn's attention to it, he merely remarked, "That hole is a damned nuisance." I admired his calm, but his words hardly solaced. I plugged the hole with a rag, but the stuff blew back with force. In desperation I drove a twig into the hole and hammered it with a piece of iron. And look at the miracle! The stick held, reducing the inflow to a trickle. I felt relieved, triumphant, and my joy was climaxed by the sight of Tarmugli near at hand. It was only a five-mile crossing, but how glad I was they were behind us.

The beach at Tarmugli is short but it is beautiful sand, shaded by the forest behind. Anchoring the dinghy with its nose to the sea Hla Din jumped out and made straight for the forest with Burn's .22 rifle. Burn and I went to the sea, I to swim, he to collect shells. "I take these for Jean, she makes dolls out of them," he explained, scratching in the sand. "All the dolls you saw in our house are made by her."

The swimming wasn't much good for the water was shallow.

Also I did not like the look of the Japanese mine that had settled close to the shore. It was old and rusty and should be perfectly harmless, but that scarcely aroused my confidence, such things are known to have gone off before. I would have much rather left it to the grey cranes who were using it as a dressing-room. They sat imperturbably on its top and preened their feathers.

"The Administration is willing to give a thirty-year free lease on all these islands to whoever is willing to develop them," Burn said, standing arms akimbo, hands full of shells. "I would like to build a holiday hut. Jean and I can come here for vacations."

Burn swam on his back, then waded out in disgust. He is four inches taller than I so found the water even shallower. "That is no swimming," he muttered. "It's sandcrawling."

We did not dry ourselves, the wind did it for us. Under a tree Alvis had laid out a hot lunch, and we tucked into it. There was teal curry, roast turtle, and baked fish which we had caught on the troll. It is amazing what these Eush Police lads can put out with such primitive arrangements.

The journey back was as boisterous as before. Nearer land Burn pointed to a round island and said, "People believe that this island gives birth to rocks. Rocks fall out of it every few days into the sea. No one knows where they come from."

The sun had set but the moon-like iridescence of a white cloud showed us the outlines of Port Mouat which was nothing more than a dilapidated mangrove jetty. We stepped upon the stone quay and climbed over the cobbles towards the grey truck that was waiting for us. Hla Din and Benedict took leave of us and turned the dinghy around to go back to their outposts by the same way we had come.

CHAPTER SEVEN

STONE AGE ISLAND

It was at a party on the *Investigator*, the Indian Navy ship that had been charting the waters around Port Cornwallis in North Andaman, and which had called at Port Blair for a courtesy visit prior to her departure for the mainland, that Chief Commissioner Ayyar took me aside and said, "I have two propositions to lay before you. You can either come with me and my wife to Shoal Bay to see some rehabilitation work; or you may accompany the Development Officer's party to the Onghie island. Which would you prefer?"

I did not take long to decide. "The Onghie island," I said.

Since my arrival in Port Blair I had been hearing a good deal about the palæolithic tribe of Onghies, a primitive people whose home was Little Andaman, the southernmost island in the archipelago. Except a few officials, no civilians had ever visited the island, but the Onghies themselves were no strangers to Port Blair. Since the time a small shipwrecked party of theirs was rescued by a government boat and returned safely to Little Andaman, the tribe had dropped its exclusiveness, and once a year a batch of them visits Port Blair, rowing all the eighty miles of the open sea in their primitive dug-out. They stop in town for a day or two, enjoy the townsfolk's hospitality, and then return home loaded with gifts. Govindarajalu had shown me some photographs of these people taken during one such visit, and they had intrigued me; savages in the real sense of the term, practically naked.

"In what language do you converse with them?" I asked.

"Sign language," Govindarajalu replied. "But what do we want to converse with them for? They bring nothing to sell, and what they accept from us is also little, matches, sugar, tea, bits of cloth, and so on. One thing they are keen on, tobacco. They are heavy smokers."

The Administration maintains an Anthropological Depart-

ment at Port Blair to study the life and history of the islands' indigenous tribes. I met its director, Choudhary, a well-spoken man in his late thirties. He waxed enthusiastic about the Onghies. "Indeed an interesting people," he said. "There are hardly any such tribes left in the world today. Their way of life is what mankind lived twenty thousand years ago. For them nothing has changed. They eat what nature gives, and for warmth they depend on the sun and the fire. But for the Italian anthropologist, Dr. Lidio Cipriani, who arrived here eight years ago and spent six months on their island, they would have remained practically unknown. I must say he was a courageous man, for no one had dared to live with them before. He did a considerable amount of research but a lot still remains to be done. We are concentrating on learning their language, and have compiled a small vocabulary. By the way, why do you ask?"

I told him that I was going there with the Development Officer's party.

"Good luck," he said.

We started by M.V. *Indaus*, a hospital ship presented by the Australian government under the Colombo Plan which, between her regular errands of mercy, is also employed to transport officials to various islands, especially those where no regular traffic plies. It was well past ten when we set sail under a beautiful moon, and after passing Ross Island, we turned directly south. The ship bustled with the government party, the three officials and myself occupying the cabins, while their servants and subordinates spread out on the hatch adjacent to the fo'c'sle. There was no time to get acquainted that night, but the following morning all of us gathered at the breakfast table. In addition to the Development Officer, Malhotra, the party included the Public Health Officer, Dr. Chakraborty, and the Plantation Officer, Jagan Singh. Malhotra and Chakraborty were going there for a routine survey, whereas Jagan Singh's purpose was to investigate the possibility of fostering coconut development on the island. During one of his subsequent visits to Little Andaman Dr. Cipriani had planted some coconuts and Jagan Singh was now going there to see how they were coming up, if they were coming

up at all. No commercial purpose was attached to the venture; the trees were being grown to provide food for the tribal people.

"What made you think of planting coconuts?" I inquired.

"They grow easily on these islands. The soil is very suitable for them. Even nuts from Burma and Siam which the sea sometimes washes ashore strike root." Jagan Singh was young and enthusiastic.

The man whom I did not meet until we were practically there was young Bimal Roy, an assistant in the Anthropological Department, who was to act as the party's liaison officer. He had been Dr. Cipriani's assistant during his six months' sojourn, and during that period had picked up the Onghic language. He, and to a certain extent his servant Simone, are the only two civilized persons who are versed in that language.

We were leaning against the rail watching a succession of islands pass by, North Cinque, South Cinque, Brother, then Sister, then Little Brother, then Little Sister, all hilly and rocky and crowned with dense foliage.

"Have the Onghies always been friendly?" I asked Roy out of curiosity.

"No. At one time they were hostile. If you annoy them they can be fierce even now. Last year a Burman shell poacher tried to get fresh with their women. They killed him—women are considered inviolate in their tribe. But see how simple they are. After murdering the man they rowed all the way to Port Blair to complain about the man's behaviour and tell us what they had done."

"Were they arrested?"

"Why should they be arrested? The man had no right to be there. That is tribal territory and trespassers cannot expect protection of the law. As a matter of fact the Administration forbids any lay person from visiting the island without their permission." He added vehemently, "I've no sympathy for shell poachers. To get their shells they will go to any length, and teach these people all manner of vices. I am told nowadays they are inducing the Onghies to smoke opium. Can you imagine anything more horrible?"

The sea was calm and clear and soon we saw a green line arise over the horizon. By and by the line broadened into a forest and on its rim stretched a beach. "We've arrived," Roy exclaimed, peering eagerly through his binoculars. "That island you see there is Little Andaman."

The beach was a blemishless ribbon of white sand except in one place where a big tree had fallen across it. The word of the island's appearance had spread on board, and everyone lined up against the rail straining hard to see. As we approached landward and the water turned green indicating the presence of sand at no great depth, the *Indaus* slowed down, and when we were about two miles from shore blew her blast. In that vast openness it sounded weak, but it must have carried over, for through a gap in the coastal shrubbery little mustard seeds poured out upon the beach. They clustered around a log, and in a few moments the log was afloat pushing towards us. On and on it came like a needle going through cloth until the outlines of a native dugout became visible.

The dugout was similar to what Burn and I had travelled in at Tirur, a hollowed-out tree trunk with square seats at the prow and stern, and fitted with an outrigger. Its occupants were indeed strange-looking, dark, with woolly hair, one actually with a painted face. Two adults were poling and rowing the craft, while two little boys sat huddled in the hull their eyes wide open with curiosity at the sight of the big ship. Except for the little strips of cloth they wore around their groins, they were completely naked.

"What a good thing we found them here," Roy said, looking keenly at the dugout. "These Onghies build homes for themselves all over the island and move from one to the other according to wherever hunting is good."

The savages' faces were intent while they poled, but when Roy called out they broke into a wide grin and laughed.

"What was the joke?" I asked Roy.

"No joke at all. I merely said how well they looked. That pleased them."

The dugout was next to our boat and the savages stood up and took in bedding rolls, boxes, cooking pots and pans

from Roy's servant Simone who was handing them down. When the unloading was finished Simone lowered himself into the dugout, and the savages started to pole away.

"I wouldn't have the courage to go by myself with those people," I said.

"Are you worried about Simone?" Roy asked. "He is quite safe. He knows them. He was with us in the Cipriani party." Then peering hard through his binoculars, he added, "Look, look, look. The whole village is turning out to welcome us."

I looked. A part of the beach was now strewn with mustard seeds.

After breakfast the *Indaus's* dinghy was lowered to take us ashore. Everyone who could packed into it, Chakraborty, Jagan Singh, Roy, and myself, the staff, practically everybody. The water was indeed delightful, a sheen of green so clear I felt like jumping out and swimming some. Half-way we met the Onghie dugout, a new batch was coming along to give us a hand if we needed it, but we told them to turn back.

Nearer shore the water became muddy, for our mooring point was the Dugong Creek, a wide stream banked by a thick forest. The trees that grew here were the same as everywhere else in the Andamans, casuarinas, silk cotton, gurjon, padauk, ficus, and beneath them the usual matting of creepers, weeds and grasses. We tied the dinghy to a stake and climbed up on shore. Malhotra and Roy went by the jungle path to Obate which is the name of the village we were heading for, but most of us preferred to go by the beach guided by the savages who continued to pole in their dugout. After about a mile's traipse Jagan Singh noticed a clump of coconut fronds rising behind the edge of the forest. "There they are," he said, beaming with delight. "The palms are coming up."

I stepped into the clearing to look at them. The palms had grown to a man's height and beneath their spreading fronds sat Simone squatting upon the ground with the luggage scattered around him.

Simone, I noticed, was having a hard time lighting a fire.

It consisted of faggots and dry leaves arranged between three stones, and every time he blew into it smoke billowed up and filled his eyes and lungs making him cough and splutter. How the Onghies who sat around him in a circle laughed at his discomfiture! Then a young Onghie, taking pity, advanced to help and bending low until his cheek rested on the ground blew hard and steadfastly between the stones. Instantly a flame shot up, and there was another round of laughter.

"What's the fire for?" I asked. Simone was now filling a pot with water ready to put on.

"Cooking for Roy sahib and myself," he answered, wiping his tears.

"What about us?"

"You will eat on the boat. Roy sahib and I are staying here."

My party in the meanwhile had gone ahead and I was anxious to rejoin them.

"Where is the Onghie village, Simone?" I asked.

"Beyond that hedge," he muttered, still rubbing his eyes.

"Far?"

"No. Just a hundred steps."

"Show me the way."

Instead of doing it himself, Simone gave me two Onghie guides. They rose, wiped the dust off their bottoms, and started leading me, one in front, the other behind. The man before me was carrying a dhau, but I noticed that although the shrubbery on both sides of the path was thick and often leaned over, he never chopped it off, instead he held the branches aside to make a passageway.

The clearing we arrived at was slightly bigger than a tennis court and Onghie women were sitting in it with their children. The women were naked too except for a bark tassel about the size of a book hanging below their navels. Our party, seated in the shade of a tree, were trying to engage them in conversation, but the women would not respond. Even their menfolk sat aloof without speaking to them.

Their behaviour with Roy was different, however. When he arrived there was chatter and laughter all around, and everybody fell to dragging him in their laps and hugging him

passionately, men as well as women. We were naturally envious of the treatment meted out to him and asked why. "This is their welcome for someone who comes after a long absence," he explained. "You see, I haven't been here for more than a year."

Roy went over and bantered with the two young women who were sitting behind me, and after an exchange of words, one of them felt inside her cane basket and brought out a big crab and placed it before me. I instantly moved away, for the creature was a monster, the size of a soup plate and its claws looked positively vicious. However, seeing that I was nervous the woman put it back in the basket.

"Was that a practical joke?" I asked Roy sourly.

"Not at all. I told them you were hungry and so they offered you that crab which they said was the only thing they had."

I tried to communicate with these people on my own, but without success. I spoke, I gesticulated, I clowning, but that made no impression. Malhotra, too, endeavoured to do the same but with equal unsuccess. He went over and sat among the women flourishing a ten rupee note in their faces. They withdrew in horror. He tried to befriend the children by singing a song. They regarded him woodenly. He patted their heads to show affection. They exhibited surprise. He was disgusted. "Let's go," he said, rising. "Let's go and look at the coconuts." The party rose and filed out behind him, including the Onghie males.

I was now left alone with the women and children, and wondered how I was going to pass my time with this dumb crowd. I noticed that one of the kids had a bow and arrow. I took it from him and purposely let it go the wrong way. The children laughed. I did ditto a second time. Thereupon two kids rose, wiped their bottoms, and holding me by my fingers escorted me to a secluded spot. There they took turns to demonstrate how an arrow should be released. I feigned interest in their instructions and did it right this time. They smiled benignly at my effort.

Emboldened I gathered the children around me and squatted down with them. I began with the Indian greeting

"Jai Hind" (Victory to India) and beckoned them to repeat it. They did it lustily. After that I went over to a nursery rhyme. That turned out to be a hit, the children repeating it line by line. The women were now also taking interest, observing us through the corners of their eyes, smiling. To indicate that I had no more tricks left I turned a somersault, and did it badly. The whole crowd fell to laughing at that, including the women who held their bellies and rocked.

The ice, it seemed, had been broken, but how was I going to profit by it? I was anxious to see their village, and would have liked them to show me over, but I felt the women would not co-operate. Once or twice I did try to tell them, but they went on weaving their cane baskets without taking notice. It seemed I had broken the ice at the wrong moment.

I called over my two bow and arrow instructors and said "Simone" clearly, pointing back with my thumb at the same time. The kids looked blank. I did that again, and now light dawned on the women. One of them shouted something to the children mentioning the word "Simone". Instantly the children raced through the shrubbery and fetched him.

It was apparent I had called Simone in the middle of his cooking for he arrived with a knife in one hand and an onion in the other. "Did you call me?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I want to see the Onghie village. Where is it?"

"There, in front of you," Simone said, pointing with his knife at a large dome beyond the hedge.

"That's a hut," I protested. "I want the village."

"That is the village. Onghie villages consist of one large hut in which all the families live."

I requested him to show me over. The hut was a big oval dome made of thatch, the roof sloping down to the ground like an igloo. We stepped inside through a small opening. It was partly dark and musty, and all I could see were wooden beds raised on poles all along the edge, nothing else besides, no pots, no pans, no weapons, no personal belongings of any sort. Every bed, however, was adorned with a string of pigs' skulls and turtle heads hanging in an arch from the roof. I asked Simone what they indicated, and he said they were

their hunting trophies. Over one bed was an empty bottle. "Contained medicine or something?" I inquired.

"No," Simone said. "They use glass to trim their hair. They break it, heat a small piece on the fire and singe the hair according to the style they want. Generally they prefer a circle going right down to the nape of the neck."

"But how is it, Simone, that there is not a soul in this place?" I said, looking around at the deserted hut.

"They use this only for sleeping at night. The daytime they spend on the beach or in the jungle."

When we came out into the clearing we found that the women and children had moved to where Simone was cooking. Groups of them were resting or weaving under awnings made out of freshly gathered branches. The two young women Roy had bantered with had built a fire and were baking the crab on it. They had placed it on the cinders, and when it sizzled and steamed and changed colour they took it off with their bare fingers and broke it into small pieces with a stone. The pieces were then distributed among all. It was quite clever how they extracted the crab meat; they did not poke it with sticks nor break the shell in their jaws, they just used their tongue and teeth to suck out the substance. When the eating was over the two women washed the claws in sea water and stowed them away in their baskets.

The children were a pleasure to watch. They ate their bit of food without worrying their mothers, and when some of the women got into the dugout and poled away, they merely stood and watched, no one cried. When the women were gone they returned to play. They had no games as such, their favourite pastime consisted of climbing up trees and sitting on the branches. The tiny ones crept up the young coconut palms, while the older ones attempted higher trees. When they were bored with sitting they would slide down and dig holes in the ground with their fingernails. It was amazing what deep holes they dug.

At noon our party returned. They were going on to the creek without halting and I joined them. What a state they were in, wet, exhausted, bedraggled! Malhotra looked the worst of the lot, the hat sitting berserk on his head, shirt

hanging out of his trousers, his feet scarcely able to lift up, he was somehow plodding along. "What a terrible walk," he would constantly moan, then to Roy, pathetically, "How far to our dinghy, please?"

"Not far. Just carry on," Roy would reply encouragingly.

At which the Development Officer would groan and struggle on.

The party had reckoned on a mile-long walk, instead it had turned out to be three miles, and into the bargain the tide had risen and soaked them to the skin. That accounted for their present state.

Everyone collapsed in the dinghy like wet sacks. No one spoke, but sat glumly, their eyes on *Indaus* which was swaying and rocking on a high tide. When at last we reached her the crew had to help most of us up on deck.

After lunch Roy prepared to return to the island. I decided to go back with him, and had my luggage transferred to the dinghy. I went in to Malhotra. The Development Officer was lying in the bunk of his cabin, a handkerchief pulled over his face.

"Malhotra," I said.

"Yes," he said weakly, lifting up the handkerchief in a pinch.

"I'm going with Roy."

"Return soon." Then clasping his head, "Oh, oh! I've a terrible headache."

"I'm going there to stay."

"What!" The handkerchief came off in a jiffy.

"I intend to stay in the village. I shall be able to observe Onghie life better from there."

"My dear man, you don't know the people."

"I'll be staying with Roy and Simone in the Anthropological hut."

"They know the people. You don't."

"But I want to stay there. I'm going anyway."

"All right, go," the Development Officer grumbled, his face once again going under the handkerchief.

Instead of going to Dugong Creek and traipsing all the way we took the dinghy opposite the village and waded out in

waist-deep water. Seeing us, Onghies from the village came along and helped to carry my luggage. Half-way we met the children playing in the water, and since Roy and I wore only our shorts, joined in their game. Though little, they were sturdy swimmers and easily outpaced Roy and myself. They were good divers, too, and would stay submerged for long periods. Their one great game was to lie flat on the sand and roll with an oncoming breaker, the one reaching the beach first being considered the winner. They persuaded us to try it, and we did, but with miserable results; every time we rose up choked with the salty water.

When we came out on the beach to dry ourselves I found that the Onghie adults, who had been watching our frolic, were smiling in a friendly manner. I mentioned this fact to Roy.

"They are pleased with you because you played with their children," he explained. "They are touchy people, and don't like foreigners because they feel they are not willing to mix with them. Now that they have seen you play with their children they know you have no such prejudices."

Evening came suddenly to Little Andaman. As the sun went behind the trees birds started a fantastic orchestra of calls, the pigeons, the bulbuls, the cranes, even the crows which are rare birds in this archipelago. Everything looked and sounded lovely, the sky with the onset of twilight turning violet, the breeze blowing cool and fresh, the waves chanting eternally on the beach. Only the Onghies provided a doleful contrast. They sat around their communal fire moping, their heads hanging down. When Roy joked with them they answered him dismally. Conversation in earnest followed after which some males rose and went plodding along the beach.

On our way to the Anthropological hut, which lay a hundred paces to the right of the coconut palms, I asked Roy why the savages looked so mournful. "They are hungry," he said. "All they managed to get today was a potful of honey. I told them that we had brought a whole fish from the boat for them and that it was lying at the creek. That's what the men have gone to fetch." Then with concern in his voice,

he added, "Food is getting scarce on this island. Unless we do something this tribe may starve to death."

"What can we do, Roy? We can't make more wild pigs or more fish. After all, we have our limitations."

"We should teach them to cultivate a bit. We must teach them to grow yams. They eat yams. So far they have eaten only wild yams. Now we must teach them to grow their own."

"Are they developed enough to undertake cultivation?"

"Why not? Dr. Cipriani and I cleared a patch here to grow our vegetables and these fellows helped us. We persuaded them to eat some of the vegetables and they liked them. Mind you what we grew was brinjals, beans and all that, whereas they like root vegetables. That's why I said yam. There will be another advantage in teaching them to grow, it will fix them to a spot and break their nomadic habit. This wandering all over the place isn't good for them. Water isn't good everywhere on the island."

The Anthropological hut was a wooden structure in a large clearing consisting of two adjoining rooms. It was, like all houses in the Andamans, raised on stout posts, and had a thatch roof. It had a long wide veranda and we found Simone seated on it with pots and pans containing our supper. Seeing us some of the Onghie lads who were with him fetched water in a pail and some others washed freshly cut banana leaves which were to serve us as plates. Being hungry we wolfed the food, and although the fare was simple, boiled rice and curried potatoes, it tasted divine. While we ate the Onghies sat around chatting to Roy and Simone, but none, I noticed, ever cast an envious glance in our direction. When we finished the lads cleared away the banana leaves taking the leavings to their dogs who were with the rest of the community. Afterwards Simone gave them the left-overs, a potful of rice and another of curry, and they took it back to share with the others.

Since we had only one lantern, and Simone needed it for his washing-up, we retired early, Roy in one room, I in the other. A big moon was in the sky sending a platinum beam through my window, and I could see in its light masses of mosquitoes hovering outside my net.

"Roy," I called out. "What did the Onghies do when you first came?"

"They were shy and secretive at first and used to watch us from the shrubbery. By and by they showed themselves, but never came near. Dr. Cipriani had instructed us not to interfere with them but strictly to go about our business. We were to talk to them only if we were talked to. For a month they went on like that, aloofly. Then the bolder ones came forward to help us carry things. Soon after that they started speaking to us. It wasn't long before the village became friendly."

"You never had trouble with them?"

"Never. On the contrary they were obliging. But for their help we would never have been able to see the interior of this island. They took us all over the place and introduced us to their various communities. They are a nice people once they lose their fear of you. This is a big island, about three hundred square miles, but the Onghies live only in the centre and in the north of it. The rest is swamps and creeks. Onghies do not go there because they are full of crocodiles."

"Any snakes?"

"There are, but none poisonous. Even the scorpions have no sting. The only poisonous creature in the Andamans is the centipede. Its bite brings up swelling and causes acute pain."

"I admire the way you have built up friendship with them. Not many people have the courage or temperament that you possess."

"All credit goes to Dr. Cipriani. He taught us how to deal with these people. Now I've grown to love them. If I had means of my own I would come and settle down here."

Those last words I heard in a haze. After that I fell asleep.

The bulbuls woke me up in the morning; there were lots of them in Little Andaman, and they sang lustily. The sun also had arisen, through the open door of my room I could see its rays gilding the pinnacles of casuarinas that grew on the other side of the hut. Mosquitoes still clung to the outside of my net, but once flicked away they vanished into dark corners. I did not bother to kill any, there were too many.

Simone tiptoed into the room with a pot of tea, an aluminium vessel from which I drank straight because we had no cups. I was getting used to the taste of condensed milk, for Little Andaman has no cattle and the Onghies have never heard of milk. True, they drank tea occasionally—government parties like ours distributed tea and sugar among them as gifts—but only in the shape of a brew boiled in a large aluminium vat without milk. The vat too had been given as a gift.

The Onghies were up before us and were hovering around the hut inquiring if there were any chores to be done. The majority of them were lads, and Simone made them fetch water from the well, a shallow wide-mouthed spring behind the coconut palms across which the stout branch of a tree had been thrown. Onghies drew water by sitting on it and dipping in their wooden containers. Some of the containers were hollowed-out logs, others short lengths of the giant Burma bamboo which the sea occasionally washes ashore. The containers were the only pots they possessed, and they carried them on their shoulders slung from woven fibre straps.

If I had any fear of these savages lurking in my mind it was gone by that single day's contact. I had slept with my door and windows wide open, and my rifle and *kukri* had lain in a corner out of my reach. I had nothing to fear for the Onghies did not covet a single thing I possessed. As long as I behaved decently with them they were willing to be nice to me. And what more does one want in human relationship?

Roy was up cleaning his teeth.

"Roy," I said, "do Onghies have marriages? I always see the women on one side and the men on the other, the sexes hardly ever mix."

"They have marriages but no celebrations to go with them," Roy said. "They choose freely and the day on which the boy and the girl paint each other's bodies with white and ochre clay is regarded as the day of their marriage. For a fortnight thereafter the girl wears a tassel in front and behind her so that everyone knows she is married. After that no male except her husband will fraternize with her. Adultery is un-

known in this tribe. Not only that but neither of the partners will be able to marry again if subsequently one dies. Their relationship is strange towards their children, however. The children are looked after by all the women irrespective of whether they belong to them or not. At the age of thirteen or fourteen the children begin to fend for themselves, and are at liberty to join another community if they wish."

"Do brothers and sisters marry? I ask this because their community is so small."

"Strictly forbidden, even for first cousins. Haven't you seen that squat young man who laughs goofishly? He had to marry a woman old enough to be his mother because the only other women left in his community were his sisters and cousins. There is no hope of his ever begetting children, but I don't suppose that worries him. Onghies are contented as long as the community has enough children."

That morning Roy and I were to go in separate directions, he across the creek to escort the officials' party to the eastern section of the island, while I had planned a shoot in the jungle behind the village. My guides were to be Onghies but when it came to the point only Kanju, their leader, presented himself, the rest elected to go with Roy. Considering I had planned the shoot for their benefit—they adore wild pig meat—this seemed absurd, but it wasn't exactly. What use would they be, they told me through Simone, considering they had no weapons, their last spear being broken a fortnight previously? Their reluctance was shared by the dogs, too. When Kanju called out only three responded, and that half-heartedly, the rest continued to loll by the fire. A hundred paces ahead two of the animals fell back, and a while later the remaining one did the same.

There was no alternative except to depend on our own sight and hearing to track down game, and this in the jungle we were traversing through seemed difficult. The footpath was clearly marked but the vegetation was incredibly thick, we could not see even a yard on either side. The overhead foliage was equally dense, not only was it covered with a skein of branches and leaves, but vines of all thicknesses wove among them. On the floor of the forest lay varieties of wild

flowers, blue, yellow, pink, some shaped like bells, others like balls.

Without Kanju I would be lost in that forest where no axe had ever fallen, it had grown exactly as nature made it millenniums ago. Kanju was leading, but I noticed that his gaze often wandered up to the tree tops where imperial pigeons cooed. When at one point he stopped and pointed up I thought he was calling upon me to shoot the bird. But that was not so. He was indicating a huge honeycomb, and murmuring "makki, makki" delightedly, meaning wild bees. He was thrilled with the discovery, for later in the day he would return with his companions and bring that delicious foodstuff down.

After the woody part came a clearing, a creek about thirty feet wide (or the branch of one), which had to be crossed by stepping over a fallen mangrove. Kanju went ahead quickly and steadfastly, but I faltered in the middle. The balancing feat itself was not so unnerving as the thought as to what would happen if I were to go over, for the water beneath was dirty and the banks were thick with mud. I turned back.

"Kanju!" I called out from the starting point.

Kanju had already gone across, but hearing me he returned just as quickly and surely. He took the rifle from my hand and piloted me safely over the bole, holding my hand. I felt steadier this time until one step before reaching hard ground where my foot cracked a rotting branch and sent it crashing down. The branch did not stay where it fell but began to sink, for it was not mud but quicksand.

Across the creek we started tracking in right earnest, every few steps Kanju would pause and listen. Not once, I noticed, did he look into the shrubbery for animals, nor on the ground for spoor. After a mile of this walk-and-halt we arrived at an old abandoned village. The centre of the hut had collapsed but the Onghie beds on the edges still stood erect. We sat on these to rest. How I would have loved to ask this man how long ago this place was deserted and why, but owing to ignorance of one another's language I had to put that thought out of my mind. To end the annoying silence I decided to

employ the limit of my Onghie vocabulary. "Kanju," I said, "kui?" Kui in Onghie means pig.

Kanju shook his head despondently. "Kui narema," he replied.

I was downcast for "narema" means no, or nothing. And those were the only two words I knew of their language.

I was gratified to notice, however, that Kanju was not at all affected by our lack of luck and was as alert and helpful as before as we went back to the village. On this occasion we slightly deviated from the path we had taken originally, but the character of the forest was still the same, thick everywhere. Then my gaze alighted upon a sight that took my breath away, a silk cotton tree with a buttress twenty-five feet wide and a bole easily eight feet across. I had never seen a tree of these dimensions before, nor believed one existed. A hundred paces farther a yet bigger giant came into view, a ficus with a trunk radius of twelve feet and a buttress width of forty. These buttresses rested upon the ground like ships' propellers, and in between their blades half a dozen elephants could be easily be stabled, they were so big. How I wished I had brought my camera along so I could take their pictures. But even a camera could not have coped with the situation. To take that tree into the viewfinder I would have had to withdraw several score feet, and in that dense forest there simply was no room. I felt so awed by these arboreal giants that I chopped off the vines that wound around their trunks to enable them to grow even bigger and higher.

On the way I cut a length of cane creeper to test out Burn's theory, and sure enough water did ooze from it. In the course of the hacking I had a slight accident. Kanju's dhau, which I used for the purpose, had a broken handle, and it slipped and cut my knee, the blade going down to the bone. It was not a painful wound, but I was afraid the walking would make my leg stiff, so I washed it with spittle and was going to tie it with my handkerchief, when Kanju offered to minister. I let him. He plucked the leaf of a wild plant, folded it and wiped off the blood. Not only did the bleeding stop, but by the time we were at the mangrove bridge the wound seemed to have healed. How I was tempted to go back and

collect a specimen of that plant! But I decided not to, for I did not want the wound to open by that additional walk. As before, Kanju led me over the mangrove bole, and I took steps even more cautiously this time, for the branch I had cracked and caused to fall down that morning was completely sunk.

All was not well in the Onghie camp; that I could sense from the prevailing atmosphere. They looked glum and their conversation was desultory. Even the children, jolly otherwise, mooned about on the beach like lost sheep. In a leaf shelter a woman lay groaning with pain, and Roy was bent over her murmuring soothingly. When he saw me he came over and said, "All these people had to eat last night was fish and some honey. As a result this woman has stomach ache. Do you happen to have anything for stomach ache in your bag?"

I looked at the woman. She was young, scarcely out of girlhood, and in spite of her woolly hair and black shining skin, looked handsome. She lay still most of the time but now and again she would clasp her distended belly and groan, and her pretty features would distort into ugliness with the paroxysm.

"All I have is anacin, if that's any help," I said.

"Something is better than nothing."

We walked back to the Anthropological hut together. Roy looked worried and anxious. "I don't know what the future has in store for the Onghies," he said in a tone of soliloquy. "Leave them as they are and they will die of starvation. At the same time to risk to introduce them to the civilized form of living may not be safe either, for these aboriginal people lose the will to live when a new way of life is forced upon them. Christian missionaries tried to civilize the Andamanese, another primitive race that lives in Middle and North Andamans. They were taught trades, how to sew, knit, and all that. Some were even taken to the mainland to widen their vision. We gained their friendship by that, but what was the outcome? That tribe has practically died out. From about five thousand at the turn of the century they have dwindled down to twenty-three. Imagine, just twenty-three!"

I gave him the anacin packet. He stowed it away in his pocket.

"I feel sorry for this girl," he went on reflectively. "Don't you think she is pretty?"

I agreed.

"We used to call her Miss Little Andaman," Roy went on. "I first saw her when I came here six years ago. She was a girl then and used to romp with the other children. On a subsequent visit I found that her manner had changed; she had grown reserved, and she wore a tassel under her navel to indicate that she had reached the age of puberty. After puberty Onghie courtship begins. How lads pestered her with their attention! Often she would come for advice, and Dr. Cipriani would banter, 'Why don't you choose me and be done with it?' and she would burst out laughing. Then we heard she had married. Now for an Onghie that is a great thing. But the marriage instead of bringing her happiness has only made her sad. She told me she cannot bear children. That is breaking her heart. That is the lot of many Onghie women. In this small community four out of twelve women are sterile. What is to be done? More than any other factor it is this curse of sterility that is destroying the Onghie race." Roy looked thoughtful.

That was a point to ponder over. No group of people could be left in greater seclusion than the Onghies are on Little Andaman. Except for the occasional visits of officials no one is allowed to go there so the tribe can live their lives undisturbed. Even the forest is left untouched in order that their source of food supply may not diminish. And yet the men and women were losing their virility, powers of reproduction. Why?

"Do you think malnutrition is the cause of it?" I said. "I noticed one thing. That little boy's arrow I played with yesterday had no feathers. If we could show them the advantage of using feathered arrows they can supplement their diet with birds. This island teems with pigeons."

"For heaven's sake, don't tamper with their arrows!" Roy exclaimed. "They use them to shoot fish with, that's why they have no feathers. In any case Onghies don't eat birds. Dr. Cipriani and I often offered them a part of the brace we had shot. They wouldn't touch them."

At this point Kanju, accompanied by some Onghies, came and said something to Roy at which the latter departed. Onghies believed in paying social visits and I found that this was one of them. They were five in all and were content to sit about on the veranda and watch me. Since there was some free time on my hands I decided to type out my notes, using the raised veranda of the hut for desk and a log for stool. But the log, being cut unevenly at the bottom, often slid from under me, and every time an Onghie had to fetch it and arrange it afresh. I wondered if I couldn't have something firmer to sit on. An idea came. Could I make these men build a platform like one of their beds which could serve the purpose of a bench? By exuberant gesturings I managed to communicate the idea. Kanju had his dhau, and I supplemented it by giving another man my *kukri*. They were thrilled by the sight of its broad, shining blade and looked admiringly at it.

All of them fell upon the task with great gusto, chopping down saplings, selecting lengths of poles, lashing them with bark-strips and so on. Within half an hour my bench was made, so firm and strong I could even use it for my siesta.

This spot of service called for reward. Govindarajalu had told me about the smoking habit of these people, so I had brought along a limited supply of tobacco leaves. These leaves they crush, and fill the powder in a crab's claw and smoke it like a pipe. Kanju was an inveterate smoker, his mouth was never free of this claw, and when he had no tobacco left he would crush any old leaf in the hollow of his palm and smoke it. So when I fetched the bundle of "sukhwa", as these people call tobacco, the circle of Onghies tightened around me, their faces lit with happy expectation.

Now distributing largess among a crowd of savages can be a tricky proposition if you don't know their customs and manner of precedence. Should the older ones be given more than the young? Can one be favoured more than the other? Who should be the first to be given, and so on. I decided to play safe by giving each individual a leaf. It became obvious that they were not satisfied. They returned the leaves, albeit one or two did it reluctantly.

I gave them an extra leaf each. That did not satisfy them either. I observed that some of them were frowning, Kanju worst of all; his face looked stern. What was I to do? I wished I had done this tobacco distribution when Roy and Simone were present, but having started the business I had to go through with it.

I withdrew all the leaves, put them together, and handed over the bundle to Kanju to distribute. That rascal gave the others a leaf each and kept the rest for himself chuckling mischievously in conclusion. Needless to say the others were annoyed. Now how was I to put matters right? I resolved to be firm, and indicated to Kanju that he should return the leaves which he did but with a surly face.

Without flexing a muscle I gave them a round of leaf each. Noting that they were not satisfied, I gave them another, and then yet another. Then I gave Kanju an extra leaf because he was their leader, and for taking me into the jungle that morning, and immediately withdrew into the room and put away the rest in my bag. When I came back on the veranda everyone was smiling happily. Apparently the reward pleased them, so also the justice with which everyone had been treated.

The amazing thing about these savages was that they were such clean people. None ever smelt of perspiration, and I did not see a single child with a running nose or dirty eyes. As a matter of fact they smelt sweet. No one spat, or dropped rubbish. Even the painting of their bodies which made them look hideous at first sight did not seem so hideous after a while. I do not know why they painted themselves, whether to relieve pain or as a decoration, but it was a clean paste obtained by mixing coloured clay with water.

That afternoon I lay on my bed thinking. Except for this Anthropological hut on my left in whose cool shade I was lying, everything around me was the same as it had ever been on this island, the cool breeze from the sea, the mighty trees before me, the koestrel circling in the sky, the muffled voices of Onghies as they sat gossiping in their shelters. I had often wondered how, if I were transported two thousand years ago, I would react to the society then existing and whether I would

feel like a fish out of water. And here I was plunged in an age remoter than that, and feeling not in the least bit queer. Being more knowledgeable and used to better means I could not be a part of their social order, and yet I could deal with them for they were pleasant and understanding people.

Then another thought came. The Onghies were nice, but why were the Jarwas nasty? Both tribes had lived and endured in identical circumstances, and were akin physically. Strange how the two exhibited different, contradictory reactions towards civilized man. Since the British settled these islands a century ago no effort had been spared to befriend Jarwas, and yet there is not one instance where they made an encouraging response. Why was that? Would they have to be gate-crashed like the Onghies were? After his success on Little Andaman Dr. Cipriani wanted to do the same with the Jarwas, but the Administration would not let him. Well, unless that last and drastic remedy is tried out it would be premature to pronounce final judgement on the Jarwa race.

That afternoon the Development Officer's party called on us. I felt ashamed we could not offer them a cup of tea—how could we considering we had no cups? Malhotra looked thoroughly refreshed today and was in the best of spirits, challenging one and all to a wrestling bout. A young Onghie took him on and gave a good account of himself. Eventually Malhotra, a stout, thickset man, would have floored him, but that was to be expected, for Onghies are small people, the tallest among them measured only five foot two inches.

The Plantation Officer, Jagan Singh, was enthusiastic about the state of coconuts on the island. He said, "Do you know, Mr. Vaidya, these people are wonderful. They haven't harmed a single coconut we planted, actually we believe they take care of them. Nearly sixty per cent of the nuts have sprouted. In another two years they will bear fruit."

That day all of us had a swim, and the Onghie males also joined in. When the swim was over the women who had sat on the beach and watched our antics, gave a dance for our benefit. They gathered in a circle on the sand and walked around, thrusting out their breasts and behinds in a suggestive

manner, hand-claps providing the timing and a chant the rhythm. This expression of friendship on their part was touching considering they would have to go to bed with practically no food in their stomachs, all that day's hunting had yielded a few stunted jackfruit and a pandanus which would have to feed thirty mouths.

After the party's departure two little boys accosted me. One of them carried his baby brother on his back seated in the loop of a broad belt the other end of which went over his skull. He said something in the Onghie language at which the other thrust a shell into my hand. Then both clamoured for "sukhwa". It was obvious that they wanted to exchange the shell for tobacco, but I thought that was ridiculous considering the boys were barely six years old. I laughingly said, "Sukhwa narema," and returned the shell believing they would not want it back; a shell has no value for Onghies. To my surprise the boy took it and the two went away sulking.

The following morning I could sense a feeling of sadness in the Onghie camp because they knew we were leaving. Except for our company they had gained nothing from our presence, and yet they seemed to have developed a fondness for us and would have liked us to stay on. Roy stood under a tree chatting away to a group of males. Afterwards he told me that they were inquiring about one or two persons they knew in Port Blair. One of the persons was Burn whom they had named "Tatabole", that is "Man with a Scar" because of the scar under his arm. That is how Onghies name people even among themselves, denoting the person's prominent physical feature. Kanju, for instance, meant "The Little Man", it suited him because of his very small stature. The tall man was called "The Tree", while a sparkling dame was named "A Little Piece of Rag".

When our luggage was packed I distributed the presents I had brought, a dhau for Kanju, a knife for the tall Onghie, a smaller one for the oldest. To the rest I gave fishing hooks.

In the clearing near the palms the Development Officer was doing his present distribution on behalf of the Administration. He had given them packets of tea and sugar and was

asking Roy's advice to whom the four lungis he had brought should be presented.

"Tear them up and distribute the pieces," Roy counselled.

"But they are full lengths!" Malhotra objected. "Shame to tear them up."

"Even if you give them the full pieces they will still tear them up. They prefer ribbons to cloth."

And so the lungis were torn up and the rags distributed, and soon every Onghie wrist, ankle and ear was fluttering with coloured festoons.

All the Onghie village stood in a line to see us off. Kanju and another man jumped into their dugout and accompanied us all the way to the *Indaus*. For a few minutes they came on board and Roy showed them over the bridge and the engine-room. They did not seem impressed in the least and were chuckling merrily when they jumped back into their dugout.

The *Indaus* engines coughed like a giant, and the green water churned into foam. For a long time we could see the Onghie dugout going slowly back to the island, Kanju and his companion constantly waving their arms to bid us good-bye.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CROCODILES AT DIGLIPUR

ON returning from Little Andaman I discovered that during my absence from Port Blair Burn had already left on his provisioning trip, the *Cholunga* having received her fuel supply from the incoming boat from the mainland thus relieving *Nilkamal* to perform her normal duties. I was disappointed, for the trip goes round the archipelago's three main islands, and that I knew was my only chance of seeing them.

It was Easter. Bangara, the Superintendent of Police, had called on Shrinivasan for a chat. He noticed how downcast I felt about the matter.

"You don't have to pull a long face because Burn has left," he said in his usual hearty manner. "I will radio him to pick you up at Long Island tomorrow provided you can find a boat to take you there."

"An L.C.T. should be leaving for Long Island tonight. Vaidya can travel on it," Shrinivasan added helpfully.

I was happy, but alas! not for long. Bangara rang up police headquarters to get exact information about *Nilkamal's* movements, and was told that *Nilkamal* had left Long Island and was already on her way to North Andaman. That was the end of my hopes, for I knew that except for the *Cholunga*, which was not due to leave for another four days, there was no other boat scheduled to leave for North Andaman in the near future.

That evening I was standing at the window of my room watching the peculiar phenomenon of a red moon rising when Noor Mohammed trotted up to tell me that I was wanted on the phone. It was the police headquarters speaking. In answer to their radio inquiry Burn had agreed to return to Long Island to pick me up the following morning.

That was a great bit of luck and I packed hastily for the journey.

I had travelled in all manner of boats in the Andamans, big boats, small boats, new boats, old boats, but this L.C.T. was quite a character. Designed as a carrier for tanks and trucks during the last war this square ship which resembled an empty swimming pool was now being used to transport timber. When I embarked on her at midnight I found that there was no timber in her hull, instead there were rows and rows of beds occupied by forest workers on their way to the camps in the north. I was taken aback at the sight of the mass dormitory but was relieved to hear that I did not have to sleep in that deep hollow, but that my bed had been fixed on the bridge which was a covered terrace over the stern. On the seas the L.C.T. shuddered like a malarial patient, but owing to her peculiar structure she neither rocked nor swayed and consequently I was able to enjoy a comfortable sleep. At dawn we reached Port Meadows where we halted for half an hour to disembark the forest workers, then proceeded to Long Island which was another four hours' journey. As we entered the stream that divides the town of Long Island from the Main Island I could see *Nilkamal* patiently awaiting my arrival.

On transferring to *Nilkamal* I found that Burn was parked out on the port side of the foredeck and he invited me to do the same on the unoccupied starboard side. This was a peculiar way for the Chief of the Bush Police to travel and I asked why he was not in his cabin.

"Given it to my cook, Ganesh," he said. "Too hot to live in a cabin in this season."

Long Island was an apology of a town, one short road straddled by low, ramshackle huts, nothing else. The only house of distinction was the old bungalow of Sharma, the acting Divisional Forest Officer, with whom we lunched. It was up on a knoll and commanded a wonderful view of the surrounding sea and creek. There was nothing in the place to make us tarry so we set sail at two o'clock in the afternoon in a warm sun and a playful sea, skirting the rocky forested shores of Middle Andaman.

Two hours later all that changed, and with amazing celerity. We were having our tea on the table immediately below the bridge and had hardly picked up our cups when a huge wave lifted up the *Nilkamal* and the tray came crashing down. Ganesh made another pot of tea, but we drank it in glasses which we could hold better than cups for the boat was behaving wildly. By the time we had drunk our beverage the world was dark, clouds spreading from horizon to horizon like a huge umbrella, and we had to switch on the lights to be able to see at all.

The next three hours were a terrifying experience. The sea was rough, as only the Andaman Sea can be, lashing at the boat this way, then that, lifting her, dropping her, just like a cat playing with a mouse. Every now and again something would crash down, maybe a coil of rope on the fo'c'sle, or pots and pans in the pantry, or somebody's luggage on deck, no object on board could remain stationary. Then came the climax. Bush Police lads who were travelling in the fo'c'sle *en route* to their various destinations, began to go sick. At first they were strong enough to approach the rail and vomit in the sea, but a time came when they were too weak to do that and were sick on the deck. One man was so bad we had to send him out of sight down into the hatch.

The storm was indeed fearsome. It raged for hour after hour, giving our hoary old *Nilkamal* no peace. She gasped through that formidable sea pushing her way forward almost yard by yard. Although the wind was unmerciful and the waters fierce how we prayed for the rain to come so at least the sky would be cleared. But our prayers went unanswered, the menacing canopy would not budge.

And then Burn came out with a novel suggestion. "What about having our supper?" he said. "I know it is only just past six, but I thought it would help us pass the time."

"All right," I said, "provided Ganesh is on his feet."

Ganesh was. Fearing the storm might get worse and he himself might go sick he had finished his cooking and was pleased we were going to eat early. There was no question of laying the table now, the dishes, plates, knives and forks were

dumped on the table and we ate the best we could. What amazed me was the amount of food we put away.

At long last our prayers were answered, the rain came, but it scarcely matched the fury of the storm. It pattered weakly on the roof and the canvas around the deck. As a matter of fact we feared the waves more than the rain, they were lashing savagely against the boat, and our beds and things had been fastened to the centre of the deck so as to save them from getting wet. And as we sat wondering whether the storm would ever stop, and if *Nilkamal* would be equal to making the run to Mayabunder, our next halt, a sailor tottered up to us holding in his hands a barracuda practically as long as himself. "Isn't this a beauty?" he said, displaying the fish with pride. We said yes, it was, and the man tottered back. A moment later he was with us again to show another barracuda. "The trolls have been hanging out since the afternoon, but it's only now that fish is getting hooked," he said, adding with exuberant gestures towards the sky, "That means the storm is soon going to be over."

And the storm did abate, the sea became calmer and the rain stopped altogether. Everyone on board heaved a sigh of relief, and by and by even the darkness lifted revealing a pattern of bright stars. There was still some wind, and *Nilkamal* had not finished with her mad dance yet when in that dark silhouette of land on our left we saw lights glowing in the distance. "That's Mayabunder," Burn said, pointing. "Within the next hour we should be at anchor."

Only in the morning did I get a view of this second biggest town of the archipelago. The way people had spoken about it I thought Mayabunder was a big town throbbing with humanity and traffic, but what I actually beheld were so many houses thrown together and a few people straggling on the road. This was obviously a timber town, for there was nearly a mile long length of rafts floating in the straits, and huge piles of planks rose on the shore. The smell of timber was everywhere, logs, raw wood, treated timber, and around the saw mill close to the jetty the smell of sawdust.

Burn had some business to transact in Mayabunder. Together we went to the police station which stood at the

extreme end of the only road the town possessed, where he signed numerous papers and handed over a thick wad of currency notes to be distributed among the Bush Police. On the way back we called at the local hospital to get my foot treated. During my stay in Little Andaman a sandfly had bitten it, and unfortunately I had scratched the place in my sleep and the wound had become angry and was festering. The medical assistant daubed it with calamine lotion and gave me some in a bottle to apply later on. After doing some shopping in the grocery store, the only place in the town to have some sort of a crowd, we returned to *Nilkamal* to start on our next hop to Port Cornwallis in North Andaman.

The police lads accompanying us disembarked at Mayabunder to go to their various posts, relieving the congestion on deck. In their place came three Bengali refugees whom the Assistant Commissioner, Kerulkar, on whom we had called briefly, requested us to take to Diglipur which is ten miles inland from Port Cornwallis. They were a pathetic lot and sat huddled in a corner, but their canoe, which was tied aft, proved to be a nuisance. We ourselves had two dinghies in tow, and out in the open sea with the waves rising, the canoe began to bash forcefully against them, threatening to break them up. To avert that calamity we gave it a longer tow-rope but the wake from the boat soon filled it up and it began to sink. The tragedy was that the few belongings that the men possessed were inside it, pots and pans, reed curtains to make sleeping-sheds with, even the solitary oar, all floated away and could not be retrieved. However, the canoe had to be saved, for life in rural Andamans is impossible without one. One of the farmers and a sailor jumped into the sea and trussed up the craft with lashings of rope, and six hours later we steamed into Port Cornwallis dragging a fully submerged canoe behind us. For the farmers the loss of their belongings would prove to be a handicap, for they were going to Diglipur to start life afresh, having been driven out of their farms at Mayabunder by a maddened elephant of the Forest Department who raided their crops and homes night after night.

Port Cornwallis is one of the best harbours in the Andamans, a six-mile channel of water protected on three sides by densely wooded hills, including the 2,400 foot Saddle Peak, the highest point in the archipelago. The channel was about a mile wide and curved like a scythe affording excellent harbourage for the biggest ship afloat. Although plans are afoot to develop the place all that I found by way of port facilities was a mangrove jetty, but we did not tie up to it since the coast is full of malarial mosquitoes.

In calling at Port Cornwallis we had a special objective in view: in between Burn's regular business, we wanted to shoot crocodiles in the Diglipur creek which branches off westward from the main body of the water. The place was said to crawl with these creatures.

We had hardly dropped anchor than a little dinghy was launched on shore and came dancing to us bringing two individuals, the Radio Operator, Menon, and the Forest Ranger, Achayya. They rowed the dinghy themselves and were quite out of breath when they clambered up on deck and were thankful when we asked them to join us at tea.

"How's the crocodile situation around here?" Burn asked.

"Plenty, plenty," Menon answered, tossing a biscuit into his mouth. "The creatures have grown clever but."

The other man, small in stature, his hair gone completely grey, nodded agreement.

"Mr. Vaidya would like to try his hand at one," Burn said revealing to the men the motive of our inquiry.

"Shoot as many as you like," Menon boasted. He was a dark man with a spear-shaped moustache and spoke with great assurance. "Last time I went on the creek I saw crocodiles galore. There is one place in particular where I always see a crocodile asleep. We can easily shoot it. We must take our boat quietly to the spot but."

The other man decided that he ought to qualify that remark. "The crocodiles have become wary since these Bengali farmers started trapping them. They sell the skins. Last time I took our D.F.O. out we didn't see a single crocodile. As soon as they heard our boat they disappeared."

It was just past four, there was two hours of sunlight

before us, and so I suggested that we should go over the creek to reconnoitre.

The suggestion caused Menon to jump out of his chair. "What? Now? It's too late but. The creek is eleven miles long, and we have to go deep inside."

"Besides, crocodiles come out to sun only at ebb tide," the Ranger added.

Low tide was at ten o'clock the following morning. We started promptly at half-past six, Burn, myself, Hla Din, and the two men, to give ourselves ample time to search for the creatures. We passed the harbour promontories which looked gay with festoons of little flags the *Investigator* had planted on them, but the creek that came beyond them was dirty and sluggish, the water a muddy yellow, and foam floated on it as if someone had done their washing there.

To begin with the creek was wide, but about three miles farther it narrowed considerably and we could see both the banks clearly. Achayya pointed to a wooden platform projecting from the shore and said, "That's it. That's where the settlers fish from, they have built many such fishing machans. The way they trap crocodiles is cruel. They leave big baited hooks all night in the water and the following morning drag up the trapped creatures and beat them to death. It must be painful for the animals for crocodiles swallow their food and the hook catches in the throat." He winced at the thought as though a hook had caught in his own throat.

About five miles from where we started the creek bifurcated, the main one leading to Diglipur, the branch going to Paglipur, a new settlement area. On Achayya's recommendation we took the latter. This stretch of water was only about fifty feet wide, and narrowed as we went in. By this time the water level had gone down and there were many places where mud strips had arisen on some of which fresh imprints of crocodiles' clawmarks could be seen. On reaching a sharp bend Menon beckoned us to keep silent and pointing to a mud projection, whispered, "That's where I always see the brute."

We obeyed him implicitly, and Hla Din, switching off the

outboard, silently manœuvred the dinghy round the spot. Imagine our disappointment when all that we could see on that wide arm of mud were two tiny mud fish hopping about like mad.

"Swine!" grumbled Menon, examining the place with screwed-up eyes. "Where is he gone today?" He felt properly let down.

The stream kept on narrowing until it was hardly fifteen feet wide. Mangroves grew thickly on the banks but they were small trees and their foliage was dappled with yellowing leaves. We kept a sharp lookout among their tangly roots and the mud bars that projected from them, but either we were still too early, or had not come to the right place; we simply could not see any crocodiles. Then we came to the end of the stream where the dinghy began to nose into the mud beneath, so we tied up to a jetty on the left whence a footpath led into the settlement area. We had spent nearly two hours on the water and felt the need to stretch our legs. Menon and Achayya invited us to go with them to where a new lot of forest was being felled, but we declined, Burn because he wanted to take some pictures, I because of my foot.

"Burn," I said, "that sandfly bite I got dressed in Mayabunder is hurting. The pain is appalling."

Burn examined the swelling and shook his head. "That fool medical assistant! He shouldn't have dressed it with calamine. The skin has closed up and the poison is accumulating inside."

However, in the circumstances there was nothing we could do about it.

Menon and Achayya returned after a good half-hour. Although full ebb was not due until an hour later water was now low in the creek and Hla Din had to manage the dinghy skilfully to snake among the various mud bars. Once again we slowed at the bend where Menon said he often saw his crocodile, but apparently the brute had decided upon other plans. However, the mud banks now showed more cloven marks indicating that crocodiles were gradually coming out to sun. They looked like tridents im-

pressed on the ground and generally entered the labyrinth of the mangrove roots behind.

I do not know how far it was to where the creek bifurcated, but it took us a good hour and a half to reach there, although I must admit we had purposely slowed down the boat's speed to give ourselves a better chance to scan the shores. By that time I had become resigned to fate and earnestly prayed that even if I could not shoot a crocodile let me at least have the satisfaction of seeing one, for I had never seen a "wild" crocodile in my life before. Nor was my prayer unreasonable, for at one place I did hear a heavy object plop into the water, and Burn affirmed he had had a glimpse of the brute.

My disappointment was understandable, and so for that matter was Burn's for we had both come out to shoot, I with my gun, he with his camera. He had a commanding view of the scene by sitting on the upraised stern by the side of Hla Din, while I, settled in the prow with the rifle lying across my lap, had an equally good view.

"Bad luck," Achayya said, adding as though to console us, "It happens like that when you come out to shoot."

Menon was feeling positively guilty and was squirming about in his seat. "How is it there are no crocodiles today? We see them every time we come," he said. There was a note of pessimism in his voice.

Burn detected a small creek shooting off to the right and asked Hla Din to turn in, and soon we were chugging through this narrow, obviously unused channel of water. The mangroves leaned so low we had constantly to duck under them to save our heads, and beneath their clustering foliage were sloping mud banks which looked like ideal crocodile terrain. Farther towards the end where the creek stopped we even came upon a crocodile wallow, but of real, live crocodiles there was no trace.

Out in the main creek we decided to go back to Port Cornwallis. Naturally enough I felt downcast, to have come all the way to this godforsaken place and not to have seen a crocodile was heartbreaking. In one way I welcomed the prospect though, I could now look forward to lying on my

bed and resting, for my foot was riven with shooting pains.

The tide was fast receding and wide banks of dirty, slimy mud had arisen. We came upon what looked like a narrow gully which seemed more suitable for fishing than crocodiles, for it had scarcely any mud banks. But Burn who is a persistent man said that we should explore it. We had doubts about the wisdom of that move for the water was shallow and could scarcely take the draught of the boat. However, once inside the aspect changed radically, the banks widened to about thirty feet, and a thick cluster of mangroves rose on either shore.

The creek was long and the dinghy chugged merrily along when some twenty feet behind us I heard a crash in the tangle of the roots. It was a peculiar noise that carried on in a line and passing swiftly ahead of us, reversed. It was a crocodile all right, for as it came shoreward we could see its moving form beneath the mesh of roots. It was moving fast, and I was doubtful if I would be able to take aim, when suddenly the creature raised its head to climb over an especially thick padding from beneath which it was impossible for its huge body to squeeze through. Instantly my faithful Mauser spoke, and I saw the brute's jaw open and close as though to emit a yawn.

Experienced shots had told me that a crocodile was the hardest thing to hit because only the neck constituted its vital part, "Anywhere else the bullet ricochets," they had warned. This was the first time I could put that theory to test and I knew very well that the bullet had hit under the jaw and not in the neck. I was, however, gratified to notice that after yawning the brute's head sank to the ground.

I was elated, and so were my companions. As Menon was thumping me on the back shouting, "Good shot, good shot!" and Achayya was happily announcing that this was the first crocodile ever to be shot in the Diglipur creek, the prostrate creature lifted up its head and began to crawl forward. Its progress was slow, but the water was not far, and I knew that once a crocodile gains the water it is as good as lost. I was anxious to prevent that occurring, but alas! in the meanwhile the dinghy had gone forward making

it difficult for me to take aim. Hastily I turned around and gave it another shot which hit on the nostrils. The beast winced at that, but carried on just the same, actually getting down on the rim of the mud below. I gave it a third shot, hitting the spine. That anchored the brute.

Menon was completely excited and became voluble while Achayya's wrinkled face broke into a wide grin for the first time that day. Hla Din was excited too, but like a typical Burman did not show it. He merely turned the dinghy around and took it close beside the animal. I am sure he intended to get down and collect the bag there and then when the crocodile opened and closed its mouth as though to warn, "One step more and I bite." We were so taken aback by that gesture that we froze in our seats, and Menon clamoured that I should shoot again. I disregarded him for I knew the animal was dead, and this was merely its last nervous reflex.

"Anyway, let's not touch it now. Let it die completely," Menon begged of us, and we deferred to his wishes.

If you overlooked its slimy, gnarled skin, and its truly evil face, the bag was a beauty, the creature was longer than our dinghy and looked enormous. Instantly my mind began to reckon how many handbags and shoes could be made out of it for the family when suddenly the pain in my foot returned to plague.

Now that we had accomplished our task I wished to return, but not Burn, he wanted me to shoot another crocodile because in the excitement of the hunt he had forgotten to take his vital picture of showing the bullet hitting the animal. Since Menon and Achayya, too, were for more hunting I gave in.

The sun had grown very bright and we could see clearly through the mesh of mangrove roots into the open patches beyond where, apparently, the amphibians went to sun. Some two hundred yards further the creek curved, and as we rounded the bend I heard another crash. The sound moved fast, and as it came nearer I saw the crocodile rushing through the roots, its belly to the ground. Crocodiles, I now knew, also had their game-paths, and discovering the

opening of this one some way ahead I kept the place covered with my rifle. The next moment the beast appeared in it, but instead of slithering down the slope took a precipitate leap and fell headlong into the water with the result my bullet hit it in mid-air somewhere in the region of the stomach. I could not say what effect the shot had on the creature for it sank instantaneously and was lost to sight. We took our dinghy to the spot and felt the place with Menon's walking stick, but the water was too deep. Fifty feet ahead the creek ended and we turned back.

How quickly time passes when things go favourably on a shoot! It must have been at least half an hour before we returned to our dead crocodile, but to us it seemed only like a few minutes. The tide was at its lowest and the animal lay sprawled out on a wide patch of mud, but how to get its huge body into the hull was the question. Burn was of the opinion that we should go to *Nilkamal* and send a party back to fetch it, but Hla Din dismissed the idea on the ground that the return journey would take at least two hours, and by that time the tide would start rising and wash away our bag. In order that there should be no further argument on the point, he waded out into the mud and taking hold of the animal's head dragged it towards the boat. His physical strength could not match his bravado, however, and Burn had to get down to give him a hand. But it was a herculean task all right. Hold it whichever way you like they couldn't move the creature. At last by superhuman exertions they managed to roll it alongside the dinghy, and then lifted it up limb by limb, first pushing in the head, then the chest, then the belly, and so on, and somehow managed to pile it into the stern, leaving the tail out to dangle because it was too heavy for them. But apparently the tail did not like being ignored in that ungainly fashion, for when the outboard started it gave a huge swipe that nearly knocked Burn and Hla Din over. In order that it might not repeat the performance Burn lashed it to the dinghy's side with a sturdy rope.

I now had a good and careful look at the creature, and discovered certain features of the species that I had not

known of. The jaw was indeed fearsome, about eighteen inches long and studded with a horse-shoe row of teeth, the canines fitting perfectly into two holes in its upper jaw. The mouth was like a deep cavern and in lieu of a tongue contained a tonsil as big as a tennis ball. I parted the closed eyelids out of curiosity, and there stared at me a pair of sinister eyes that looked typically feline. What interested me most were the bullet marks, all the three shots had taken effect, penetrating deep into the body, thus exploding the theory that, except on the neck, bullets ricochet off a crocodile's skin.

Out in the main creek Burn discovered yet another side creek and took that in too. Here the banks were widely separated and were literally crawling with crocodiles. We had gone hardly fifty yards than the now familiar crashes in the mangroves began to assail our ears, followed by plops in the water. Whoever believes that crocodiles are clumsy creatures had better revise that impression; they move faster than a man can run, and with amazing agility in that tangle of roots. One crocodile came at such a furious speed it failed to allow for the wide mud bank that spread before it. It slithered helplessly on that slippery ground and took some time to regain the safety of the water. It missed being shot at because it appeared behind our dinghy, and I could scarcely turn around to take aim. The creatures also showed intelligence. Having judged the direction of our boat by the outboard's noise, they made it a point to emerge behind us, never before. One crocodile was so full of curiosity it followed our dinghy for quite some distance taking the precaution to remain submerged in water, only its eyes showing. I did not shoot at it, for I knew that even if mortally hit the creature would sink and would be lost to us. The crocodiles we saw in this creek were about six feet long, or less.

The creek was rather long so we turned back. On the way we heard no more crashes; apparently the animals who had come out to sun had returned to the water leaving the large mud banks empty for curlews and snipe to feed on.

The *Nilkamal* was tossing merrily in the bay when we

returned to her at noon. Hearing our outboard a line of men formed against the rail to see what we had brought, but we stopped beside her only to collect Hla Din's dhau and then hastened to the shore, leaving the crowd agape at the sight of our bag. It was some size, that animal, and took eight men to lift it ashore where Burn took some photographs. Achayya fetched a measuring tape from his hut and computed its length. It was nine feet.

That afternoon Hla Din spent hours skinning the animal. When the hide was stretched out on the top deck to dry it filled every inch of the space and some overflowed down the sides partly curtaining the cabin windows. I asked the Sergeant what he found in its stomach. He laughed. "Nothing sensational. Only crab shells and stones."

Past midnight *Nilkamal* lifted anchor and started out on the next lap of our journey. We were glad to leave for the air in the port had grown still and we longed for the breeze of the open sea. All the following day small, uninhabited islands passed us until at four in the afternoon we dropped anchor at Landfall, the northernmost island in the archipelago. Like all that part, this island too was desolate, but it had a beautiful beach and I felt jealous of Burn who went there to swim while I had to stay behind to nurse my foot.

Again at midnight we lifted anchor, arriving at Interview Island on the west coast at dawn. Here Burn spent a whole day distributing rations and pay among his Bush Police, and when he returned that evening, hungry and exhausted, the master of the ship had some disconcerting news to give. "There is very little water left on board. We must make haste for Port Blair."

"You had full cisterns when you started out!" Burn countered, surprised.

"What could I do? Half the population of Mayabunder fell upon it while we were in port," he said, adding, "I hadn't the heart to stop them considering that the town is in the throes of a water famine."

That is the difficulty with colonizing the Andamans. Its only sources of water are rainfall, and a few springs.

From Interview Island we hugged the coast of Middle



School at Pilpilow: teacher arranging a game for his pupils



Two Nicobari schoolgirls playing the Indian game 'cockfight' in which they hop about on one leg and try to knock each other over



Everybody works on Choura Island. The boy is carrying coconuts and khewra, which the people boil and make into paste



Between the two poles is suspended a canoe laden with fruits and containing a dead man's body; under the hut the children are mourning for their father. This sight met us when we arrived on Choura

Andaman and turned into Middle Straits as a short cut to Port Blair. This was a narrow channel of water and both its sides were thick with a jungle that constitutes the heart of the Jarwa Reserve. For all we knew woolly heads could be spying on us from there, all ready to release their arrows, but we could see nothing in that unbelievably thick shrubbery.

At lunch time we reached Oral Kaicha, a forest camp, where Burn distributed some more rations and pay, and by four o'clock in the afternoon were out in the open sea. Burn was watching the purple water carefully. "A storm is coming, look there," he said, pointing to where masses of white stuff were rising up to the surface. "Those are squids," he added. "When squids begin to come up you can be sure a storm is on its way."

And the storm did come, a howling wind and a high sea, but thankfully, after we had tied up at the Marine Jetty in Port Blair.

CHAPTER NINE

EMERALDS IN THE SEA

ON our way from Madras, M.V. *Andamans* had halted for a few hours at Car Nicobar, the northernmost island in the Nicobar archipelago, and I literally had stood bewitched by its natural beauty, a lustrous emerald set in a background of boundless aquamarine. Compared to the sea's vastness the island looked tiny, one felt that a tidal wave had only to come and it would be washed away, and yet there was about the place an air of self-confidence, even perky defiance, that was charming, the greenery stood serenely still, caring not a bit for the wind and the waves that incessantly battered against its fringes.

There was not a soul to be seen on the beach when we arrived at the Bay of Mus, but as soon as the anchor was lowered canoes appeared from behind a promontory, and jostling on that ruffled sea like a swarm of ants, hastened to lay siege to our boat. They were small crafts hewn out of logs, and young Mongolian type of men clad only in shorts stood in them holding aloft bunches of bananas and green coconuts to sell. They appeared to be indifferent salesmen, however, for if the passengers did not respond to their calls soon enough, they dropped the fruit into the hulls and lay down to chatter and laugh, or swam about in the water just for the fun of it.

After the canoes came a procession of launches hauling in their wake a car placed on a raft of empty oil drums, and from these stepped aboard four portly individuals clad in European clothing, including an officer from the Air Force. They walked up the gangway that had been lowered alongside the ship, and talking loudly and cracking jokes, marched up to the bridge. When they came down on our deck, still talking loudly and cracking jokes, my companion, Govindarajalu, identified the personalities for my benefit.

"That," he said, surreptitiously pointing his podgy finger at a middle-aged man wearing black trousers, "is Sundaram, the Assistant Commissioner for the Nicobars. Next to him, that short fellah, is Sarkar, the government doctor. And that tall, slim man in a panama is Cassim Jadwet, the biggest trader in these islands. He has more or less the monopoly of trade in the Nicobars." The Air Force man, he said, he did not know; apparently he was a new posting.

The visitors stood outside the dining-room and clamoured for tea, except the trader man; he ran up and down the deck shouting instructions to his labourers and in between the hectorings talked away to the sailors who were fastening rope rails to the gangway. Then his gaze descended upon me. He came quickly forward and said, "Are you Mr. Suresh Vaidya?"

I said I was, at which he shook my hand. "I met Bangara just now. He told me about you. Please come to the Nicobars. They are interesting islands. I will see that you are taken to anywhere you want to go."

I was thankful for the invitation because I had heard that only boats of the Nicobar Trading Company, of which Cassim Jadwet was the chief, plied in those waters, and even though they were employed mainly for transporting cargo, they had limited accommodation for carrying passengers too.

An idea occurred to me—why not cash in on the man's promise right away?

"This boat is going to be here for some time. Do you think you can arrange to show me over for a bit?"

"Of course, why not?" Cassim said. "I will entrust you to the care of a reliable man, Group-Captain Nicholas, who is in charge of the air strip here. Nicholas."

Nicholas detached himself from his clamouring companions and came leisurely over.

"Nicholas, this is Mr. Vaidya. Why don't you drive him around the island? It will be fun for you." Then to me, laughing, "Take care, he is the fastest driver in the Nicobars."

Nicholas smiled self-consciously. "The captain and some

of his friends would also like to come. Let's wait for them."

We went ashore in the ship's launch and piled into the Land-Rover that was standing in a clearing behind the beach. The road snaked through dense vegetation, palms, pandanus, silk cotton, frangipani, all matted around with a jumble of weeds and ferns. Here and there we passed groups of Nicobaris carrying coconuts and bananas on their backs, but Nicholas never cared to toot his horn, just whizzed past, leaving them dazed against the bushes. However, with pigs and chickens who crossed the road, emerging suddenly from one bush and entering the other, he was cautious, and would instantly jam on the brakes. "One has to be careful with these animals here," he explained, "the Nicobaris look upon them like gold. They won't mind being run over themselves, but kill their chicken or pig, the entire village council will hold its meeting and flay the offender. For killing a pig they fine four sacks of rice, for a chicken, half a sack. That's a lot considering rice is imported in these islands and the local population treat it as a luxury."

"What do these people earn their living at?" I inquired, noticing the dhaus stuck in their belts. They looked like gardeners or agriculturists.

"They hardly care to earn their living," Nicholas observed. "Nature has blessed them with wild fruit and the seas are full of fish. They gather those and eat them. Mind you things are changing somewhat for this island because the population here has increased enormously in the last ten years; it is eight thousand now, and people are beginning to feel the need of working for their living. But it takes a long time for the Nicobari to change his ways. Even now we find it difficult to recruit labour for our work."

We passed a church, and after that a village, a circle of beehive huts raised on high poles. In the open space in the centre of the circle women in sarongs stood gossiping and children played around them. Then we came to an open field where a football match was in progress watched by intense-looking spectators.

"Nicobaris love sport," Nicholas went on. "They are particularly good at football. I believe next year their team is

going to the mainland to take part in the national championship. You can rest assured they will give a good account of themselves."

"Do they have clubs and things?" Kohli, our ship's captain, who was sitting next to Nicholas, asked.

"As a rule, no. The village lads make a collection and buy a football. This club is run by the church. The missionaries have done some good work in this island. They were the first to start schools, but couldn't teach much because of the limitedness of the Nicobari vocabulary. Now other schools have started using Hindi as the medium of instruction."

After some miles of driving we came to the air strip and the Land-Rover flew like a plane when it hit the tarmac runway. The runway terminated close beside the Air Force station where we got down to have a drink. At Nicholas's beckoning his batman brought green coconuts from the refrigerator and cutting off their crowns with a chopper offered their water to drink, the famous Nicobari dab. We drank straight from the nuts and felt refreshed.

The island was indeed delightful. Trees cluttered up the landscape and birds sang among the palm fronds. Their calls and the murmuring of the sea somewhere in the background were the only sounds we could hear. True, occasionally bursts of shouting broke out from the playground where the Air Force personnel were playing badminton and volleyball, but those moments of excitement were few and far between.

I observed that there was no plane on the air strip, not even a scout, and asked the Group Captain why.

"We don't need planes here, this is only an outstation," he said. "Once every ten days a plane calls from our Calcutta base, but it departs the same afternoon after delivering our supplies."

Much as we would have liked to we could not tarry long in the place, and so started on our journey back. On the way we stopped at a village which, like most Nicobari villages, was situated close to the beach. The tide was out and among the coral outcrop that spread everywhere children were gathering shells and crabs. In the cluster of

the beehive huts near the beach, over whose leaf roofs curls of smoke were rising, we came across a large hut and climbed into it by using a notched pole which Nicobaris use for a ladder. A muscular young man with a mop of hair crowning his square head was painting decorative canoe-heads with some sort of oil.

"What's this place?" I asked him.

Luckily he knew Hindustani, but he was slow of speech and the answer came after a protracted series of ah, ahs. He informed us that that was the village's communal hut.

"And what are you painting those canoe-heads for?"

Again the answer came falteringly, but it appeared that the island's canoe races were due soon and he was getting them ready for the occasion. These heads, with eyes and stripes and circles painted all over them, were fixed to the prows to distinguish one craft from the other in the course of the race.

I was impressed by the size of the hall and the tidiness to be found in it and remarked about it to Nicholas.

"Nicobaris are the most communally-minded people I've come across," he said. "Not only does each village have its own community hall, they have also communal death houses where badly ailing persons are taken to die, and birth houses for women in labour."

"You said there is Christianity in this island," I reminded him.

"Only a part of the population is Christian, and even these still observe many of their old customs."

M.V. *Andamans* was all alight when we reached Mus. Before getting into the launch I thanked Cassim for the drive he had arranged for us.

"I tell you these islands are interesting. Come for a long stay," he said, then poking my shoulder with his forefinger, he added, "When you are ready, inform our manager, Parikh, at Port Blair, and we will arrange everything for you."

Two months after this conversation I was ready to undertake the trip to the Nicobars. The company's manager, Suleiman Parikh, a jolly fat man, arranged for me to go by

the *Safeena*, but being a cargo boat she was not particular about the date of her sailing with the result her departure was postponed from day to day with exasperating casualness. This was a matter of concern for me since the monsoon breaks out in the Nicobars by the middle of May, bringing inter-island traffic to a standstill, and here I was already towards the end of April. On the first occasion the postponement was caused because some of the crew needed medical attention. When they recovered we waited another day to see if the boat from the mainland had brought any cargo for *Safeena* to pick up. After that the *Safeena* was kept in harbour for two more days to suit the itinerary of three officials from New Delhi who had come on a tour of inspection. When at last we did start late one night, only one cared to show up, the other two having changed their minds in the meanwhile.

Safeena was the pride of Port Blair boats, and deserved it. An 800-tonner with an 8-foot draft she sailed with the grace of a swan and was considered the safest boat in harbour. Nothing about her was pretentious, the cabins were matter-of-fact but comfortable, and the food and service typically Indian and satisfactory. Her crew was entirely native, not only by origin but even in the matter of dress, they walked about the vessel in lungis and vests, and it was difficult to distinguish the officers from the crew. As seamen they were experts, however, and knew every bit of the waters around the archipelago which is notorious for its rocks and reefs, and whose weather conditions are unpredictable in the extreme.

The following morning, after breakfast, Dr. Chakraborty, the Public Health Officer, who was accompanying the malariologist Dr. Basu to take a sample survey of the Nicobars, and I, were sitting on the bridge when the big sea came. We had recently passed Little Andaman and were now ploughing through the Tenth Degree Channel, considered to be the roughest bit of sea in the Bay of Bengal. One does not know what goes on beneath the ocean here, maybe there is a submarine volcano, or a mighty subsurface current, but *Safeena* began to rise and fall on huge swells

as big as circus tents. They were not just a few casual waves but surrounded the boat on every side. One moment we would be above the water, the next we had nosed down into a vast depression. And yet these men on the bridge sat calmly and chewed betel leaves as though we were going through nothing extraordinary.

"It's frightening," I said to Chakraborty.

"There's twenty more miles of it," the doctor warned.

I said, purposely speaking in English so the others would not understand, "And these chaps look unconcerned."

"For them this is run of the mill," the Health Officer laughed. "You should see the Tenth Degree Channel in a storm. Then waves foam and snarl and lash and even big boats have a time of it. But rest assured you are in safe hands. These men are not educated, they have attended no marine school, but they understand the sea like the palm of their hand. Some three years ago they did a storm rescue that can be regarded as a great sea saga." Turning to the dark, clean-shaven man who was managing the helm, he said, "Moosa, tell our friend the story of the *Holchu*."

The man remarked modestly, "That's an old story."

"Never mind, tell it. My friend is interested to hear it," Chakraborty insisted.

Shyly the man began to narrate, his gaze constantly ahead, his hand on the big wheel. "*Holchu* was a new boat the Company had acquired, and *Safeena* was escorting her to Car Nicobar. You see, we have no wireless on these boats, but soon after leaving Port Blair we passed the *Maharajah* and her master warned us through the megaphone that a cyclone was coming. However, our tradition being not to turn back once we set sail, we carried on. We bitterly regretted that decision when we entered this channel. It was foaming and fuming like a mad horse and our boats could hardly maintain contact. I was in charge of the *Holchu*. She was having a particularly bad time since she was a smaller boat, a fifty-five-footer. Then something terrible happened: our engine broke down. With great effort we managed to bring the two boats alongside and *Safeena* took *Holchu* in tow. By afternoon we managed to make Car

Nicobar, but that was only the beginning of our troubles. The gale was blowing furiously and we lay tossing about on the open sea for Car Nicobar has no safe anchorage. Then the worst thing that could happen in the circumstances happened; *Holchu's* anchor broke. Now when in a storm a ship's engine breaks down and she loses her anchor, too, you might as well write her off, for she is completely at the mercy of the sea. But we did not want the Company to suffer a loss so decided to tow her to Nancowry which is a natural harbour. It was a risky decision, for the storm was constantly rising, but we took it, for to continue to stand at Car Nicobar would have been suicidal."

"Didn't the people at Car Nicobar send you help?" I asked.

"What help could they give? They had only small launches and the big waves would have easily overturned them. We carried on the best we could but it was a struggle against mighty odds. We were hardly a few miles out when the tow rope broke. With great difficulty we managed to tie another. That also broke. We exhausted every bit of rope on the two boats. As a last resort we tied the wire hawser which we never use for such purposes, but that also broke. You can imagine our predicament. Waves were rising on all sides, the wind was lashing like fury and a terrific rain was pouring down making visibility poor. Desperately I shouted to *Safeena's* master to proceed to Nancowry on his own and leave us to our fate, for that way we could save at least one ship. He shouted back to say that he was agreeable to abandoning the *Holchu* but not her crew. Then he did something that few sea captains would have the courage to do in such conditions; he brought the *Safeena* close by my ship and dipped her prow mast over my stern so the men could leap up, catch it, and crawl over to safety. It was a dreadful thing to do, for had there been a collision both ships would have foundered. But that man is such a wizard with the helm he did it again and again until all the crew were picked up."

"Didn't you feel nervous when you were crawling over?" I asked.

"I did not come that way. I remained behind because someone had to manage the helm until the operation was completed. When everyone had gone I jumped into the sea and swam until the *Safeena's* crew picked me up with a rope."

"Tell him what happened to the *Holchu* afterwards," Chakraborty interrupted.

"We saw her drifting away, but amazingly enough she did not sink. A fortnight later we received a message in Port Blair that a boat from Singapore, sighting her drifting about in mid-ocean, had taken her in tow to Colombo. We went to Colombo and brought her back."

"And what is the master of the *Safeena* doing these days?" I said.

"There. He is sitting next to you."

I scarcely expected that youngish man in his thirties, sitting unobtrusively near the window wrapping a betel leaf for himself, to be the hero of such an episode, and to show my admiration I patted him on his back. The man just smiled shyly.

"But for these men," Chakraborty went on, speaking in English, "the Nicobars would still be tiny islands cut off from the rest of the world. Thanks to their daring they are now opened up for regular traffic."

By late afternoon we were out of the Tenth Degree Channel and the sea became calm. We were not calling at Car Nicobar which lay immediately beyond it but were making a straight run for Nancowry a hundred miles farther south, where itinerary for the malariologist had been fixed up. As evening approached white clouds filled the sky, and smack in the centre of them I saw a daub of pink like a rouge mark on a woman's handkerchief. For a brief while a petrel hovered around our boat, then a big dragon-fly. This insect must have strong wings to have come all that way, for the nearest bit of land, the desolate island of Batti Mali, lay at least forty miles to our east.

It is strange how a place looks different from what one imagines it to be after hearing or reading about it. Everyone had told me that the Nicobars, and Nancowry in particular, were dominated by the coconut palm, and what I

saw on waking up the following morning was a thin line of green hidden behind a ribbon of sea mist. As we approached the coast and twilight deepened, the line became broader eventually acquiring the shape of a dense forest. True there were coconut palms too, but they were mostly along the fringes. Beyond them, on the hill that formed the island's backbone, was a screen of evergreen plants with domes of gurjon rising high. To begin with the greenery looked dull, but as we turned into the channel banked by high rocks on which waves were breaking into foam, and the sun, marigold as in the Andamans, rose above the ridge, it began to sparkle like an emerald.

Nancowry is a cluster of three islands, Nancowry proper, Camorta and Trinkat, and the seven-mile-long channel that they enclose makes the place one of the world's safest harbours. The channel curves in the shape of a crescent and from its apex shoots a short fork providing a deep and safe anchorage. In this fork was a wooden jetty and the *Safeena* tied up alongside it.

Nancowry harbour is landbound on three sides, yet the water was so clear I could see every bit of fish floating in it. They were fingerlings mostly, of divine colouring, green on the back, pale blue underneath, and were so transparent I could see the bones inside their bodies. They moved like a cloud among the grasses on the seabed, but would jump up when big fish chased them sounding like a patter of rain when they fell back into the water.

"Welcome," someone said behind me in a low voice. I turned around and found myself face to face with a big fat man whose prominent feature was a beard that practically hid his face.

"I am Moosaji," the man went on. "I am the manager of the Nicobar Trading Company here. Cassimbhai sent me a signal about you. Please accompany me to the guest house. Your luggage has been taken there already."

I followed him over the wooden causeway which was agog with the sounds of a hundred feet, mostly bare-bodied Nicobaris carrying loads on their backs.

Safeena's arrival had caused a stir in town, and there was

more than normal activity on the jetty and yet compared to an Indian crowd in similar circumstances they sounded quiet, no shouting, no arguments, only occasional conversation. This lack of noise was so unusual that I could not help remarking about it to my host.

Moosaji laughed, his beard trembling. "You must be finding it quiet here. All visitors do when they first arrive. The Nicobaris are a quiet people. They never quarrel, never fight, and when someone gets het up, he or she just goes away and sulks, that's all. You are probably missing the sights and sounds you are used to on the mainland too, no trains, no cars, not even horses and bullocks. We have none of those things here. At first one misses them, but then gradually gets accustomed to their absence. Look at me. I have been here ten years and am now so used to the quiet life that when I go back to the mainland I find it too noisy and feel bewildered. I long to come back."

The Nicobar Trading Company's small colony was the only whiff of civilization in that primitive world of beehive huts and green jungles, square wooden houses with red tiles, wedged in between a hill on the one side and the beach on the other. The guest house stood on the sand like a large beach hut, with the tide water lapping under its floor. Its regular furniture, I found, was piled up in a corner to make room for a large dining table, all laid ready for our breakfast, with chairs arranged around it. On one of them I saw Rani Lachmi laughing demurely at Dr. Chakraborty's usual run of jokes. Dressed in a yellow sari and a pink blouse she looked smart and pretty.

I went up to her, stood arms akimbo, and challenged, "I bet you don't recognize me."

For a while she regarded me in silence, and ran her fingers through her hair to aid her memory. Suddenly her face lit up. "I know you," she exclaimed. "We met in Delhi. You came to see us at our hotel. I remember you very well indeed."

"You didn't believe that I would come to your island one day, did you?"

"To tell you the truth, I didn't. So many people say they

will come, but they never do, except officials likes these." She waved her hand towards where Basu and Chakraborty were sitting. "But these people are in such a hurry they always come in the morning and go away in the evening. Do you call that visiting?"

"I'm different," I said. "I'm going to stay here for some time provided you promise to show me around."

"Certainly I will."

After breakfast Chakraborty and Basu went to Camorta, where all the government offices are located, to inspect the hospital. I chose to accompany the Rani to her village.

Past the jetty, out of the Company's compound, we came upon a large open space where some men were building a hut. They were taking their job easily, splitting bamboo and resting, tying a knot and resting, and in between were also finding time to flirt with a youngish woman flopped on the threshold of a neighbouring beehive in which a gramophone was going full tilt, that I wondered how long it would take them to put up the hut. I asked the Rani.

"They will have to complete the job in the next three weeks. The monsoon becomes due after that," she said.

"That's ridiculous time for a small place like that. Burmans in the Andamans would finish the job in two days, utmost three."

"What can we do?" the Rani pleaded. "Our people are not used to working. The present generation at least does something, but their fathers and forefathers never did a thing; they spent their time playing and drinking. It will take some time before our people begin to appreciate the value of work." It was obvious from her tone of voice that she felt ashamed as well as sorry for her people.

We passed some more beehives, every one a picture of redolence, where men and women sat gossiping, or watched pigs and chickens scrimmage in the rubbish heaps with idle curiosity. Then we came to a dry channel of water crossed by two broad planks. The Rani stood on them and waved her umbrella first to the left, then to the right. "That was Champin we came from," she said. "Now we will enter Malacca, my village."

These two clusters of huts were so close to each other that they looked a part of one single locality. "How can they be two villages?" I expostulated. "There are not enough huts on either side to make a village."

"That is how it is in the Nicobars," the Rani explained, opening her umbrella to protect herself from the warm sun. "Wherever a family set up their shacks, we call it a village. Look at that solitary hut." She pointed to the shore beyond the harbour. "That, too, is a village. It is called Hencott."

Malacca was another cluster of beehives with the usual complement of chickens and pigs. A woman with three children, two girls and a boy, pushed their canoe into the water and started paddling along the coast.

"Where are they off to?" I inquired.

"To their gardens," the Rani replied. "They will gather coconuts there and also catch some fish on the way. That's our usual diet, coconuts and fish. Occasionally we eat pendanus, but we have to go into the jungle for that. They are wild fruit."

"When do you eat your chickens and pigs?"

"Only on festive occasions."

The Rani's own house was a nice wooden structure with big, airy rooms. From the eaves of its spacious veranda hung a cane triangle with a parrot sitting on it, its foot tied with a twine of cane. This was the first caged bird I had seen in the Bay Islands, and I asked the Rani what made her keep it.

"It's not my parrot," she explained. "It belonged to my mother. She brought it from Rangoon. After her death I am looking after it."

"Have you taught it to speak?"

"How can I? It belonged to my mother. According to our custom everything that belongs to a dead person has to be abandoned on their graves. However, I could not very well leave this parrot on the grave, so I brought it home. I only feed it, never make it do anything."

We went into the sitting-room. It was nicely furnished with chairs and tables and settees. Along the wall was a radio set, in a corner a sewing-machine and a gramophone, and on the walls hung photographs. Conspicuously enough

I did not see the picture of a saint or a deity anywhere which one generally finds in an eastern home providing the clue to the person's faith.

"What religion do you follow, Rani?"

"We are a backward people. We have no religion," she said with charming simplicity.

"None whatever! You must have some worship, some festivals."

"Only Burrah Din. We celebrate it on the first death anniversary of the last head of the family."

We went out on the veranda and sat on deck chairs enjoying the cool sea breeze. "All these houses," the Rani said, indicating the cluster of beehives before us, "are ours. My relations live in them. You see, in the Nicobars all the family, including cousins and distant relations, live together. See those children," she said, pointing at two naked kids who were having a whale of a time in a canoe, "they are my nephews, my younger brother's sons." She shouted something at them in Nicobari, and promptly the kids abandoned their boisterous game and climbed into the nearest beehive. "They are running wild because their father is not at home. He has gone to Trinkat to supervise nut collection." She showed me where Trinkat was, a low island on the other side. "That's where our gardens are."

"You must be getting a lot of nuts," I said. "Your islands are famous for coconuts."

"Nowadays we do gather a lot, thank heaven," she said reflectively. "Formerly we Nicobaris used to be careless about nut collection and were exploited as a result. Indian and Chinese traders used to come here in their sail boats and would cheat us abominably. They would palm off a few cheap things and in return took from us the right to collect nuts from our gardens. They used to gather thousands of rupees' worth of nuts, but in their books we were always shown in debt. It was terrible. Every household was steeped in debt. The Indian Government stopped the traders from coming to these islands. Now each village has formed its own co-operative who buy our copra at market prices, and sell it to the Company at prices fixed by the Assistant Commissioner

in Car Nicobar. It is fair dealing all round. We are making profit both ways nowadays, from the sale of the copra to the co-operatives, and from the dividends we draw from them. Every family has become well-to-do as a result."

"And the Company must be making good profits too," I said.

"They do, but our co-operatives are buying up their shares. In another five or six years we will own the Company."

That sounded like a laudable ambition, but would these simple people be able to manage its affairs?

A young man in varicoloured shorts and a T-shirt—which seemed to be the common garb of Nicobari youth—stepped out from the sitting-room and slicing off the crown of a green coconut offered it to me. I was rather full up and made excuses, but the young man would not hear of it, and the Rani backed him up. "You must drink it," she insisted. "Just as your people offer tea to visitors we offer dab. We never allow a guest to go without drinking dab."

"Rani," I went on, taking sips of that refreshing drink, "I'm glad to hear your people will soon acquire the Company. But how are you going to run it? You said yourself that Nicobaris are backward."

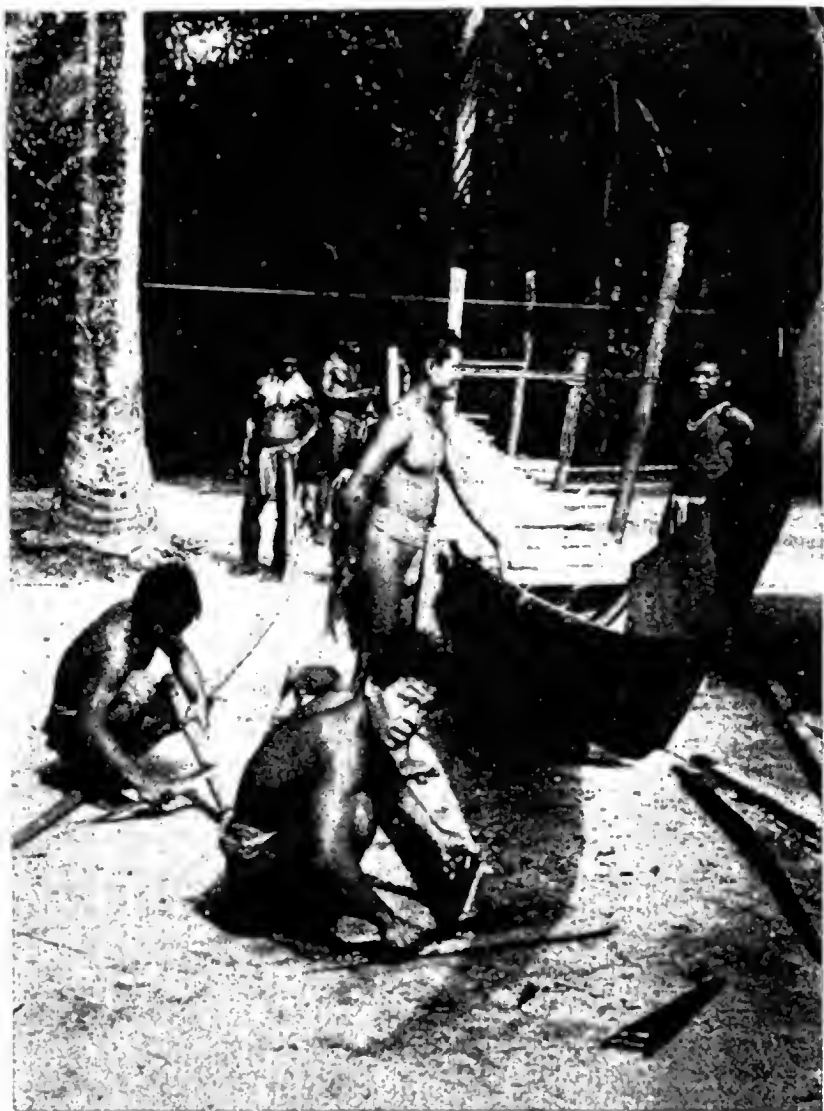
A proud smile spread over the Rani's face. "The Nicobari man is illiterate, but not our youngsters. They all go to schools started by the Administration, and are being educated. When they pass their school final examination they join the Company as apprentices to learn the trade. Several young men have already done their term and are now working in the Company. This nephew of mine," she said, indicating the young man who had given me the nut and was now leaning against the banisters, "he passed his school final and was apprenticed in the Company. Now he works in our co-operative. You see, the Administration gave the Company monopoly of trade on that understanding, namely, that within a fixed period of time they will surrender their ownership to the co-operatives, and in the meanwhile will train up our young men to take over the business."



A group of Choura women. Only Lifat's persuasion made them pose for me



Choura menfolk in a dance. The tails flying behind them are the long ends of their loincloths



The ancient craft of constructing a canoe on Choura Island. In the foreground is a modern carpenter's saw

"How do you find your work?" I asked the nephew, who outwardly showed no interest in our conversation.

"It was difficult at first, but now I find it easy. Last year we declared a dividend of ten per cent. That is the highest the co-operative has ever paid." He leaned forward in a confidential manner. "The dividend is all saving for our people, for in these islands we have to spend little on living. All our food is gathered locally, we build our own huts, and as for clothing, barring our women who are taking to fashionable dress, we need nothing more than shorts in this warm climate. Most Nicobaris allow their dividends to accumulate, and with that we buy the Company's shares."

I was surprised by the man's lucid explanation which I could never have suspected from his generally phlegmatic attitude. But then phlegmatism, I was to discover, was a typical Nicobari characteristic which alas! belied their natural perspicacity.

"Well, you have been very kind," I said to the Rani, rising. "Now I must go because people must be waiting for me for lunch."

"Come when you like," the Rani said. "And ask my nephew for anything you want."

By the time I got back to the guest house it was noon and the table was laid ready for lunch. Basu and Chakraborty had not returned from Camorta yet, but I found that two visitors were waiting for me. "Forgive us for being late coming to meet you," one of them said, a youngish man of pleasant appearance. "My name is Riasuddin. I am the Revenue Officer here. And this is my friend Mehmood Ali. He is the Sub-Inspector of Police."

The Sub-Inspector stepped forward and shook my hand.

"We have just returned from Kundol," the Revenue Officer went on. "That's a small island next to Great Nicobar. Mehmood Ali and I went there to make our last inspection before the monsoon broke out and made the place inaccessible for the rest of the year."

"How did you know I was coming?" I said, surprised.

"Bangara sent me a message at Kundol," the Sub-Inspector explained. "We police have a wireless transmitter on all

the important islands." He was a tall, hefty man with an aquiline nose, and his voice sounded gentle.

I was glad to meet these men for I needed some intelligent company of this sort to explain me things. We sat on the dining chairs and talked.

"How do you find life here? Quiet, isn't it?" Riasuddin inquired.

"Quiet, but interesting. Tell me," I proceeded eagerly, "is the Rani Lachmi the queen of this place? I am impressed by her presence and intelligence, but I didn't see any regal trappings about her."

"Rani is only a designation in the Nicobars," Riasuddin said. "These islands have village councils who decide on practically every issue that concerns their welfare, and their chairman is called the captain. Each island has its super council whose chief is called the head-captain if he is a man or a Rani if she happens to be a woman. They hold posts only for the honour it brings, nothing else. They get no pay for it. Undoubtedly, Lachmi is an intelligent woman."

"I met her nephew. He also sounds intelligent."

"These Nicobaris may look sluggish, but they are intelligent," Mehmood Ali interrupted. "They are learning all manner of jobs these days, accountants, mechanics, electricians, masters of boats. In a few years they will be doing everything in these islands."

"How long have you been here?"

"Myself a year," the Revenue Officer replied. "Mehmood Ali has been longer, eighteen months."

"Do you like it?"

At that question their faces fell. "After a time life becomes dull," Riasuddin complained. "There is nothing to do here. I am the Revenue Officer, but there is no revenue to collect. Mehmood Ali has no work either because there is no crime in the Nicobars."

"Do you mean to tell me that the Administration derives no income from these islands?" I said.

"Only the cess on copra. But that the Company pays."

At this point we heard a commotion from the direction of the jetty, and in that din the voice of Dr. Chakraborty

could be distinctly heard. Apparently the visitors had returned. I thought my visitors would stay on to meet them. Instead they got up to go.

"Surely you are not going away. Stay to lunch," I said.

"No," Riasuddin replied, "we must go back home on that launch which brought the party. It must be waiting for us."

"Pity! There is much that I would like to ask you."

"How long are you going to be here?"

"Until the monsoon breaks."

"In that case there is plenty of time. We will meet again."

CHAPTER TEN

COCONUT KINGDOM

THAT afternoon I accompanied the doctors' party to the village of Upper Katchall. The place was only a dozen miles across the sea from Nancowry, but having had to pass through two strong currents, the fifty-five-footer *Daya* that the Company employs to do errands in the southern Nicobars, took more than two hours to make it. The landing was also difficult because of the submarine rocks that sprouted up along the shore. We did it by an outboard which *Daya* had brought in tow, and one sailor had to stand in its bow gazing constantly into the water to warn the man at the helm of the dangers lying ahead. We literally zigzagged through that treacherous outcrop of rock and coral.

On our arrival the Company's local branch manager sent a word into the village for all the women to come along with their children for the blood test, but since it would be some time before they assembled Dr. Basu and I, accompanied by Moosaji, took the opportunity to have a stroll. Like most Nicobari villages Upper Katchall was a row of beehives dotted along the shore with coconut palms rising in the background. That the economy of the village was dependent upon that tree was manifest from the fact that wherever we looked we saw the nuts fastened to stakes hanging from bushes and trees.

"That's a fine way to store coconuts," Basu remarked, amused.

"The people dare not heap them up on the ground," Moosaji explained. "Look at these," he said, indicating the pigs swarming under and around the huts. "They will gobble up every nut if they were left lying around."

The pigs were noisy and mucky, but physically they were impressive specimens, fat and round like wine kegs. I noticed, however, that the males were all castrated. How then did the females have litters? And the litters were some size, anything

from eight to a dozen piglets per sow. It appeared to be an interesting phenomenon of genetics.

"Of all the wonders I have known!" Basu observed winking mischievously.

I did not know in what manner to broach the question to Moosaji, but he seemed to have read our minds.

"I know what you are thinking about," he said, forestalling us. "Nicobaris castrate their male pigs to fatten them up."

"You have not followed our point," Basu hastened to correct. "We are wondering how the sows get their litters."

"Oh, oh, that," Moosaji said, suppressing a laugh. "There are some wild herds in these jungles. Their boars do the necessary."

For the Nicobars Upper Katchall was a big village but we were surprised how few people we came across in it; the place looked practically empty. I attributed this to the possibility that the population were out at work, but my guess was belied when I noticed the people coming back from the jungle; they had a free and easy manner and wore garlands of palm fronds and wild flower wristlets as though they had been on a merry outing. Not one carried a coconut or a pendanus to indicate he had been working. There was only one exception, that of a young lad seated on a bamboo platform splitting coconuts with a dhau to extract the copra. Moosaji went over to him, picked up a copra piece, and examined it. After that the pair held a conversation in Nicobari which turned out to be of an unpleasant nature, for the young man began to sulk and Moosaji rejoined us feeling intensely irritated.

"Oh, these Nicobaris," he grumbled, "they will be a happy people when they get out of the habit of quoting their dastur. Dastur means their custom and they use its excuse to mask their laziness. See how that fellow is extracting the copra? All in pieces. I advised him as far as possible to extract the whole kernel since that fetches higher prices. The man says why should he, since his dastur does not say so. Can you beat that?"

In a way I sympathized with the lad for he was the only one working, and considering the platform was full of copra he had done a good bit that day.

"Why don't the others give him a hand? Probably overwork is making him careless," I said.

"Some chance of that," Moosaji scoffed. "He is a Car Nicobari, that is why he works. He is employed by the local co-operative. The other islanders will never agree to work. Work, they think, is below their dignity. You have no idea what trouble we had when we first came to Nancowry. We couldn't get a single man to help us. We had to carry our own loads and build our own huts."

"But I have seen Nicobaris work for you," I said, remembering the labourers who carried loads at Nancowry.

"They are Chouras," Moosaji said. "Only Chouras and Car Nicobaris work, the former because their island is barren and they must earn a living by labouring, and Car Nicobaris because of overpopulation. Among them we find Chouras the best, apart from their superstitions. They contract to work for sixty days only. On the sixty-first they will be off whether you pay them or don't. They consider it unlucky to work for more than sixty days at a stretch."

We were strolling along in the village dodging our way through droves of chickens and pigs. The beehives were old but sturdy structures, and at their entrances stood the customary notched pole ladders. The largest hut in the place, we found, was decorated with freshly cut leaves and bouquets of red hibiscus and yellow nariums. I wondered if some festivity had taken place in it, but Moosaji said that Nicobaris were a naturally gay people and often dressed their huts like that.

I was full of curiosity to see what a beehive looked like inside so we climbed into it. The place was practically dark, for the only way light could come through was the entrance, and we saw men and women, old and young, sprawled about on the floor fast asleep. From the centre of the roof hung a swing. On it was the crudely carved dummy of a man, his hand resting on a pile of clothing and a solar topee and sunglasses. I thought it was some souvenir from a carnival, but Moosaji said that was the effigy of the former head of the house. "It's the custom here to keep the dummy of the previous head of house in the hut. When the present head dies that dummy will be removed and his will take its place."

Moosaji was no respecter of people's privacy and was talking loudly, but the sleepers were not disturbed in the least. I was struck by the room's bareness, it did not contain a single stick of furniture, no boxes, no trunks, and even the pots and pans were few, two iron cauldrons, containing lumps of pork, placed on an extinct fire. Mind you, it was difficult to see everything in that dim light, so some articles may have escaped my attention, nor was I inclined to tarry there too long, for the rancid smell of old copra and pigs' fat that pervaded the room was distasteful and overpowering.

"That's how they live," Moosaji remarked when we were down in the fresh air again. "Unless we educate their children and teach them a more disciplined and hygienic way of life there is no hope of change in these islands."

A messenger came running from the "canteen", as the Company's shops are called, to inform Basu that the women had arrived, and he promptly left us. Moosaji and I continued with our stroll for neither of us was keen on watching blood tests being made.

Some way to the left of the hut was a graveyard marked by bamboo crosses decorated with festoons and painted coconut shells. Near many of these we saw sodden bundles of clothing and on one there was actually a sewing-machine, all rusty and rotting, apparently the possession of the woman buried underneath. When I asked Moosaji what if someone stole such an expensive article, he answered emphatically, "That can never happen. Stealing is unknown in the Nicobars."

Farther up the huts became fewer until they petered out on the edge of the coral reef. We turned back.

While passing through the village again Moosaji observed, "Have you noticed that quite a few of these huts are empty? That does not mean they are not used. Nicobaris are great wanderers. They go wandering in the jungle with their families and if they come upon a spot they fancy they build a fresh hut and live in it for weeks, sometimes months. When they get fed up with living there they come back here because their family graveyard is here. They will never be parted from the place where their ancestors are buried."

On the way back we heard laughter and shouts on the

beach, emerging from behind a bush. We went there to investigate and as we rounded the corner a whole group of naked men and women came rushing out of the sea and made for the other side of the bush to hide. Considering Nicobaris are uninhibited in the matter of sex, and it is common for their women to go about bare-breasted, this exhibition of modesty seemed uncalled for.

"Can't you persuade the swimmers to carry on as they were doing? I want to take their pictures," I said.

"I'm afraid they will not agree," Moosaji explained. "Partly we have to thank outsiders like ourselves for that. We have taken advantage of their free behaviour, especially sailors who used to call on these islands in the past. Now the islanders have grown wary and take precautions against every stranger."

That disclosure was disquieting, but I wondered if Moosaji was not exaggerating. Back at the canteen, where to our relief we found that the blood tests were over and the equipment was being packed, I asked Dr. Chakraborty if what Moosaji told me was correct.

"Absolutely correct," Chakraborty emphasized. "I have taken blood tests in all these islands. Ninety-five per cent of the population suffer from congenital syphilis. Outsiders must have given it to them for there is no likelihood of a native source for such an infection."

That evening Basu and Chakraborty left by the *Safeena* for Car Nicobar, thus justifying Rani Lachmi's complaint that officials called on these islands only for brief visits.

The following night we watched a cinema show. The Nicobar Trading Company arranged these for the benefit of its staff but no one objected if the local population also came to see them. The show was held in the open ground between the causeway and the canteen at Nancowry and by nine o'clock the place was crowded, people squatting down in the sand, the overflow standing on the backs of beached canoes or perched on roofs of the Company's houses. I was given a place among the managerial staff who sat on the veranda in deck chairs.

The show got off to a good start, the crowd oohing and ah-ahing admiringly as a team of American cowboys engaged in a spot of horsemanship. I was astonished by their reaction for

they had never seen a horse nor a horseman in their lives. Then came a funny short in which two Yankees encountered all manner of difficulties driving a car and the audience yelled with laughter, another phenomenon considering the internal combustion engine has never appeared in the southern Nicobars. Then followed a tediously long Indian film with a poor story and marred by overacting, and yet the audience watched it with rapt attention; nor were they disconcerted when the sound failed midway making the gesturings on the screen look ridiculous. Everyone sat through that three and a half hours' performance without budging and by the end of it were so tired the majority lay down where they were and fell asleep.

"These Nicobaris have grown very fond of the cinema since we started giving these shows," Moosaji remarked as we rose prior to retiring for the night. "In particular they love Indian film songs. For a few days after these films are shown there is a rush on our shop to buy records of the songs they have heard. They play them night and day, night and day, until everybody gets sick and tired of listening to them."

The next few days the *Daya* was going to be busy delivering supplies to the Company's canteens situated on the various islands making the most of the good weather before the monsoon set in. I therefore decided to travel on her wherever she went for that was my only chance of seeing what I could of the Nicobars. Early the next day she was due to sail for Camorta and later to West Katchall, so after the cinema show I had my bed moved to her deck and slept there. The loading went on until past two, disturbing me, but after that I fell asleep. When I awoke I found that the boat was well out to sea, and Job, the ship's pantry boy, was standing beside me with a tray of tea. When I saw what was on the tray I burst out laughing.

I had instructed this fellow, a Car Nicobari, on the previous day, that I was a heavy tea-drinker, and that nothing less than four cups could quench my thirst—a fact that had highly amused him, for he, like most Orientals, considered drinking more than one cup gluttony—and here he was following my instructions literally, holding out a tray with four separate cups filled to the brim.

"Job," I expostulated, when I could stop laughing, "why did you bring four separate cups? You could have brought a teapot containing four cups, and that would have sufficed."

That remark of mine amused him all the more, for laughing to himself he went to the pantry and fetched a teapot. Pouring the contents of all the four cups into it he held out the tray, grinning all the while, as though dying to say, "Is this how you like it, Mr. Eccentric?"

By eight o'clock we were at Pilpilow, a village on the other side of Camorta. Barring Car Nicobar, the other ten islands of the archipelago have a population of only four thousand between them, and Pilpilow had every right to consider itself well-populated with two hundred inhabitants. Hearing that some visitors had arrived Atabji, the head-captain of Camorta, came along to meet us. Moosaji introduced Mehmood Ali and myself to him with a suitable introduction. My vocation the head-captain could just about understand—he had heard of government clerks who earned their living by writing—but Mehmood Ali's he could not, try as he might. Eventually the attempt had to be given up as hopeless. Said Mehmood Ali in despair, "That is the trouble with being a policeman in these islands. People don't understand what I am supposed to do."

Since the unloading and loading of the *Daya* was likely to take some hours, we decided to go over to the coconut nursery which the head-captain was eager to show us. For the Nicobars the nursery was an innovation, for for generations no one had bothered to plant coconut trees specially, the fallen nuts having germinated and sprouted of their own accord. That had led to overcrowding, stunted growth and short life for the trees, and Pilpilow intended to combat that malady by regeneration. However, one look at the nursery and any horticulturist would have been alarmed; the saplings were growing in groups of threes, spreading outward like a star.

"Do you intend to replant them in this fashion?" I inquired.

"Yes," the head-captain replied with pride in his voice.

"That won't help you. The bunches will only cause congestion. Why don't you plant them separately?"

"It's the dastur here to grow trees in threes," the man assured.

I was inclined to argue with him in an effort to convince him of the stupidity of such a procedure, but Mehmood Ali nudged me and I held my peace. "You don't know Nicobaris," the Sub-Inspector explained. "To them dastur is almost like the word of God. They will never do anything contrary to their dastur."

Atabji was proud of another innovation in his village, the school that had been started four years before. This was situated at the other end of the village and took us some time to arrive at for the head-captain suffered from filariasis—a common complaint in these islands—and his two elephantine legs made walking for any distance a difficult and slow process.

The school was a square beehive raised on waist-high posts, and once up its short flight of steps we came face to face with a busily working class, children of both sexes and various ages seated along a wall while a teacher harangued and scribbled on a blackboard. What amazed me was that although the teacher was speaking in the Hindi language the children, every one of whom was a Nicobari, listened with attention.

Our entry, however, distracted their minds, and several pairs of sparkling eyes watched us with awe and curiosity. I regretted that we had interrupted their lesson by our thoughtless behaviour and exhorted the teacher to carry on. He agreed, and standing arms akimbo, pointed at the figures on the blackboard, demanding, "Five multiplied by nine: how many?"

Practically every child in the class was anxious to answer that question, but the teacher singled out a little girl in a red skirt and a white blouse, a frangipani flower stuck coquettishly in her lush black hair. She was the only one who seemed unsure of herself. Hesitantly she rose and murmured, "Thirty-five."

"Wrong," the teacher bawled, and turned his attention to a boy of about six. "You," he said.

The boy, dressed in khaki shorts and a green shirt, sprang up like a jack-in-the-box, "Forty-five," he shouted, and sat down pleased with himself.

By this time it became obvious that there was no point in carrying on with the lesson, for with three adults, including two interested strangers looking on, the children were hardly likely to concentrate. To arrest the confusion and noise that were slowly breaking out, the teacher dispersed the class and asked the children to gather outside. How quickly the classroom emptied!

"How many pupils have you?" I asked the teacher, who was now standing stiffly to attention.

"Twenty, sir," he answered. "But today five have failed to report. They have fever. Fever causes quite a lot of absenteeism."

"And how do you find the general level of intelligence? Do they grasp things easily?" I asked that question on purpose for before this school started education had not been heard of in Camorta.

The teacher's face beamed with pride. "Very good. I will go so far as to say that the average Nicobari child makes a bright pupil."

"Do you have to teach them the Hindi language first?"

"I have found that to be unnecessary. I go on teaching them in the ordinary way and they grasp the lessons and pick up the language at the same time."

The teacher was a short, fair-skinned man from North India and spoke excellent Hindi. When I told him that I was not an official but a passing visitor his manner relaxed, and he became chatty. He said he liked his work but regretted that the children's home atmosphere was not conducive to good scholarship since the parents took little interest in their progress which was discouraging for him as well as his pupils.

"I suppose you have fitted in with the life here?"

"The work keeps me busy, but after school hours it gets rather boring. I have no company."

"Why did you come to these islands in that case, knowing full well you would be living among a strange people?"

Unabashed, he replied, "The stomach brought me here. In my part of the country there is a good deal of unemployment among teachers. So when I saw an advertisement for teachers' posts in these islands, I applied and got the job."

We now left the classroom and came out into the open ground. At the teacher's command the children formed two lines and sang a patriotic Indian song. After that we watched some games which were played with great enthusiasm and considerable skill. What astonished me was that the games were all Indian.

"Surely, you could have included some Nicobari games in your repertoire?" I said.

"There are no Nicobari games," the man replied. "Before I taught them these the children did not play any games."

The children and the teacher were eager to entertain us more, but I strongly felt that our visit should conclude for we had interrupted their routine long enough. So thanking the teacher for his courtesy we left.

On the way Atabji said in a voice full of emotion, "Wait until these children grow up. Then you come back to see the Nicobars."

From the veranda of the canteen we could see the *Daya* tossing merrily on the sea. She had already discharged supplies for the Pilpilow shop and was now taking in a load of copra. A line of labourers were busy carrying the copra bags from the warehouse to the beach, winding their way through flocks of chickens feeding in the foreyard. Nicobar chickens were like any Indian chickens, small and noisy, but there were two cockerels among them which were enormous, nearly the size of geese. I wondered if they were a special breed but the manager said no, they were local birds specially bred for feasts.

"How have they grown so big?" I asked.

"They have been castrated."

That sounded interesting. I had heard of animals being castrated but not birds.

"Is it an intricate job?"

"Oh, no, it is perfectly simple. A woman does it. Why, do you want to see it?"

I said I certainly would.

The manager stood up from his chair and leaning his elbows upon the banisters shouted something to the labourers. Hearing that a stocky young man stopped in his tracks and

turning around murmured a reply. At the manager's behest he dropped his sack and hastened into the village, to return a few minutes later clasping a spotted cockerel to his breast. Atabji called the man over to where we were sitting, and pointing at the bird's legs, said, "See. A cockerel to be castrated must be a young bird. That you can ascertain by looking at its legs. Don't you see they are yellow, and the upper toenail hasn't sprouted up yet? That shows it is young. Old birds have grey legs."

I got up to examine the bird at close quarters but the labourer, whose name, incidentally, was Lanoul, demurred. "Don't go near it. It has become frisky because it has been starved," Atabji warned, pulling me back. "Birds to be castrated must be starved for a couple of days otherwise they bleed too much."

"Why not get on with the operation in that case?" I demanded impatiently.

"They say that Vanahoo woman who does it is sick," the manager said. "She has fever."

That was frustrating news. Here was the cockerel all ready, and here was my only chance of seeing such an operation, and the woman had to go and fall ill. I pleaded with the manager somehow to persuade Vanahoo to come along.

"All right," he said. "I will try. I will send for her."

Vanahoo turned up holding a little boy on her hip. She was young and good-looking and had been obviously yanked out of bed for her hair was dishevelled and fell over her face which, ironically enough, made her look prettier. The manager gave her an empty tea chest to sit upon. She put her child down, took hold of the cockerel and seated herself comfortably on it. Turning the bird over in her lap she called upon Lanoul to hold its legs apart and systematically plucked the feathers from its belly until only the skin showed. At her beckoning the manager bustled into the shop and returned with a canful of water, a razor blade, and a threaded needle and placed the articles conveniently beside her. She took the blade and with it made an inch long incision under the featherless belly, and with her thumb and middle finger probed into the stomach. After some rummaging the fingers

came out holding in a pinch a little thing like an unformed egg which the woman deposited on the edge of the tea chest. Again the thumb and middle finger went to work and extracted the second testicle. That done Vanahoo lifted up the cockerel and shook it vigorously to allow the blood to fall out. Then she clasped the bird between her thighs and with the thread and needle stitched up the parted skin.

The operation was over but the bird was obviously shaken up, for it stretched its legs, closed its eyes, and fainted. The woman was not worried in the least by that. She pressed open its beak and inserted a few drops of water with her fingers. That had a miraculous effect. Instantly the cockerel revived, and to our astonishment, flew right out of her hands. He even seemed to have grown energetic, for every time I approached to take his picture, he ran away in a flurry.

"In another three months the bird will grow big and fat, and then the flesh will be delicious to eat," Atabji said, his gaze following the bird wherever it went.

Apparently the exertion had been a little too much for Vanahoo in her present state of health, for she picked up her boy, took the two eggs that Lanoul gave her as the fee for the operation, and departed.

Well, it had been a busy and interesting morning, and our stomachs clamoured for nourishment and our bodies for rest. So when Moosaji said that the loading was over and the *Daya* was ready to depart, we took leave of everyone and went to the beach to the waiting canoes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SEA, SEA, SEA

FROM Pilpilow to West Katchall was only a seven-mile run, but what a struggle the *Daya* had to put up for it! For a fortnight before the monsoon arrives the sea sulks, making extra demands upon a boat's power, pulling her this way and that, and there were moments when I felt as if the *Daya* would break in two. Janab Hassan Hussein, the *Daya's* captain, a lean, shrivelled figure, knew these waters intimately, yet even he found the task trying that afternoon. In the open sea the strong tide constantly pulled us shoreward, and he had to make circles to keep true to the course. Then the currents, two bubbling rivers flowing in mid-ocean—at Katchall it is the Indian Ocean—played merry hell with the boat making her shiver and tremble. At long last we gained the Katchall coast, and there the *Daya* nearly gave up.

West Katchall lies on the northern shore of an oval bay. The mouth of this bay is narrow and is guarded by two coral reefs that almost meet in a point. Big waves constantly pound upon these reefs and the water running back into the sea through the narrow entrance was so strong it almost brought the *Daya* to a standstill. She made it eventually, by putting in her maximum effort, but that was because the weather was still fair and there was no strong wind to hamper us. In the stormy monsoon season the current gathers such force that West Katchall becomes inaccessible to all shipping.

By the time we arrived in the village it was seven o'clock and dark. We had hardly sat down to tea on the canteen's veranda when visitors called, a buxom woman in a sarong, a little boy clinging to her legs, followed by a thick-set man in a shirt and trousers. They panted up the steps and sat down at the table.

"Ah, ah, Rani Changa," Moosaji shouted joyously, rising to

welcome the party, then to the man, "And Sal! Nice to see you."

The Rani had a big broad voice as suited her stature. She pressed the boy down into a separate chair, admonishing, "Now sit there quietly, Krishnamurthy." Then in a complaining voice to Moosaji, "Nowadays you never care to inform us when you are coming. Had I not seen the *Daya* I would not have known you were here."

"He has become a big man now," chided Sal. "Big in position and big in size."

Moosaji took the crack in good humour. "How are you, Sal? And how are your eyes?"

"My health is all right, but the eyes are the same; no improvement."

"Don't you know any hospital on the mainland where we can get his eyes treated?" the Rani inquired. Then turning to me, "And who is the visitor?"

"Oh, I forgot," Moosaji said, introducing me. Mehmood Ali the Rani knew already.

The dialogue between Sal and Moosaji had puzzled me, since to all intents and purposes the man seemed to have normal sight, he had climbed up the veranda steps on his own and sat down in the chair unaided.

"What's wrong with Sal's eyes, Moosaji?" I asked.

"Don't you know? He is blind. Lost his sight sixteen years ago when he was lighting crackers. Mind you that does not hamper him in the least. He does everything everybody else does, perhaps better. He is the island's coxswain at canoe races."

"Please, don't exaggerate," Sal pleaded modestly. "Nowadays I've given up coxswaining."

"But you still fish," Rani Changa interrupted.

I was amazed at the man's intrepidity, and asked how he managed to coxswain in spite of his blindness.

Sal moved his face in my direction. "By listening to the waves. They come in series of threes, fives, sevens, sometimes nines. Judge from which direction they are coming and take them head on. Then you are safe."

"He is a real Sal," Moosaji went on, hastening to add, "Do

you know what Sal means in Nicobari? Salt. He is the salt of these islands. The Rani will tell you how much he has helped her in her public life. Hasn't he, Changa?"

"Lots," the woman declared proudly. "I don't know what I would have done without him. When we were building the school-house and the dispensary, you should have seen him. He used to go every day to supervise the work. He would feel the woodwork with his hands to see that the measurements were being correctly followed, and the nails and hinges were in their proper places. If he detected a fault he would raise hell. The carpenters never grumbled about his interference. Actually they were grateful for his advice."

The veranda overlooked an open yard and the labourers whom we had heard "whoaing" on the jetty while the *Daya* was being unloaded now arrived in it carrying an electrical generator. Rani Changa noticed the machine.

"What's that?" she inquired, intrigued.

"That's to produce electricity for your village," Moosaji said.

"Really!" she exclaimed, beaming with joy. "And what's that other thing?" Her eyes had roved to the projector and cinema equipment which another batch of labourers had fetched.

"That's the cinema. We are going to have a cinema show tonight."

The faces of the husband and wife lit up. "In that case we had better go home and change. We don't want to miss the show." Then to the little boy who had fallen asleep, "Wake up, Krishnamurthy, we are going home."

Quickly they descended the veranda steps and were gone.

The cinema show proved to be a great attraction. Lots of Nicobaris turned up, Rani Changa and Sal being the first to arrive. I wondered how Sal was going to follow the proceedings, but Moosaji said that was accomplished by the Rani giving him a running commentary on what was happening on the screen. "And you will see, Sal will enjoy the show as much as anybody else," he added.

For me, however, the show was a pain in the neck, the same two American shorts I had seen at Nancowry, and although the Indian film was different it was equally monotonous and

overdone. Worse still, the sound apparatus would not work at all. Midway through the show I decided to go to bed, but that proved to be a big mistake. The screen was a sheet hung on the veranda of the guest house behind which my bed had been made, and I was compelled to see the damned stuff from the reverse side, and from a distance of scarcely six feet.

The following morning Mehmood Ali and I were scheduled to go to Jansin where the Company had another canteen. Before we left West Katchall I wanted to photograph Sal in his ceremonial costume and he had agreed to pose for me. After breakfast we went to Changa's house, a nice Port Blair-type residence with a garden. She was seated on the veranda at her sewing-machine.

"Where is Sal?" we inquired.

"He is dressing. Go and see him in his room," she said without lifting up her head.

Sal was in his room, alone. He had already tied his colourful cummerbund with an intricate pattern of pleats, and was now busy selecting coral and shell necklaces from several boxes stored in a cupboard.

I wanted him to hurry up. "How long will you be, Sal?" I said.

"Another half-hour," he said, rummaging in the boxes with his fingers.

"All that long?"

"You said you wanted me to put on my ceremonial costume. That takes time."

"Our guest is worried because we are going to Jansin now. The bullock cart is ready and waiting for us," Mehmood Ali intervened on my behalf.

"If you are going to Jansin why do you want to take my photo? A Burrah Din is being celebrated there. All the guests will be in their ceremonial costumes."

I was pleased to hear that news, for Burrah Din takes place only once in several years in these islands and an outsider has to be lucky to catch it.

At the last moment Rani Changa and Sal decided to come along with us. They piled into the bullock cart with Mehmood Ali, but I elected to go on foot. In this land of canoes

one scarcely exercised one's legs, and that, I had found, was bad for one's liver.

Coconut trees in Katchall were a phenomenon; they grew thick like a forest. The trunks of some of them were notched, and the notched trees generally ran in a line. I asked Mehmood Ali what they indicated.

"They are boundary lines of gardens."

"What, these!" I said, surprised. "A neighbour can easily steal your coconuts and no one will know a thing about it."

My observation shocked Changa. She protested, "In our Nicobars there is no stealing."

"If any person were to steal a neighbour's coconuts we will bring him before the village council," Sal said gravely, hinting that in these islands the village council was an authority to be reckoned with.

The nuts lay everywhere, the ground was literally covered with them. As a diversion I started counting them, but gave up the attempt after a few hundred, in the course of hardly fifty steps.

The bullock cart paused before a hut and the Rani called out to a young man shelling coconuts on a bamboo platform. The man dropped his dhau, thrust his head and arms through a T-shirt, and seizing the bicycle lying on the ground, rushed to me. "Here," he said, "take this and ride."

I declined the offer. "I prefer to walk," I said.

"What! All the way to Jansin!" The man looked aghast. "Here. Take this and ride. Jansin is five miles from here."

"How will you come in that case?"

"I will walk," he said, then, on second thought, "or I may get into the bullock cart and ride with the others."

Finding me adamant he gave up persuading. We walked together, he still leading his cycle.

"Are you an employee of the local co-operative?" I asked.

"No. This is the Rani's garden. I work for her. I am a slave in her house."

The fellow looked too cheerful and happy to be a slave.

"What sort of a slave? Captured in a war or something?"

"Oh, no," the man protested. "We Nicobaris never fight wars. I am a voluntary slave. You see, I want to marry the

Rani's niece. We in the Nicobars become slaves in the household of the girl we wish to marry. That is our dastur."

"How long will you have to slave?"

We paused because the lace on one of his shoes had loosened. He bent down and tied it. "We slave for six months to a year," he said, rising. "By that time the girl can make up her mind if she wants to marry. If she does the village council declares them man and wife, and the man becomes a member of the wife's family. If she doesn't, well, he goes back to his own family."

I was glad of the young man's company for he spoke passable Hindustani and was talkative. All the while we walked he was pushing coconuts out of the way to clear the path for his cycle. Some nuts were hollow and he kicked them like footballs. "These are empty," he said. "Rats ate them. They climb trees, bore a hole in the nut and eat up the meat. Rats are a plague to our plantations. Rats and monkeys."

"I haven't seen any monkeys."

"Don't you worry. There are plenty. They are worse than rats. They eat the blooms and devastate whole areas."

I was indeed enjoying the walk. The road was soft and earthy, and for part of the way we passed through an avenue of beautiful crotens grown to the size of trees. Green and blue chameleons ran swiftly under cover hearing our footfalls. At one place the ground looked a bright red strewn with the shells of the one-clawed land crabs. The young man pushed his cycle charily over them. "Bad for the tyres," he said. "Punctures them." Then smacking his lips, "But the crabs baked on an open fire are delicious to eat. They come up in the monsoon season. We gather them in baskets."

The mighty roaring of the ocean breakers in the neighbourhood announced our arrival at Jansin. The village began at the junction of the promontory and the beach, and the Company's local manager, a young, bespectacled man, met us on the way. He led me to the veranda and offered a huge glass of lemon juice. Soon after the bullock cart arrived, and the Rani, Sal, and Mehmood Ali joined me. As we were sipping our drinks I asked the Rani where the young man who had accompanied me was, for he was nowhere to be seen. "I sent him

back," she said, complacently adding, "I called him only to offer you the cycle."

No wonder the man called himself a slave.

After the lemon juice—and we had several rounds of it, for lemons grew wild in Jansin—I requested the manager to show me the village.

"Which village?" he asked, surprised. "This is the village. This is Jansin."

"I mean where the Burrah Din is being celebrated."

"There," he said, pointing to a large beehive some two hundred feet to our right.

Mehmood Ali and I went there. It was one single hut situated in a small clearing, and was decorated with palm fronds and wild flowers. In front of it, laid lengthwise, was a canoe embellished with colourful cloth, palm fronds and bunches of green bananas, and from its mast blew festoons and bunting. On the right side of the hut was another canoe, similarly decorated, a spoon and a fork suspended from its prow to add an extra touch of gaiety. There were people in the hut, we could hear them talking, but the main body of guests were gathered in the shady piece of ground on the left where pigs were being roasted upon fires.

The way Nicobaris slaughtered pigs was peculiar, quite a scrimmage, but they treated the affair with great solemnity. They held the animal down on its back while a man thrust a pick through its chest until it pierced the heart. The animal screamed and struggled, but the men held fast until all its movements ceased. Then the pick was gradually removed and when the blood came gushing out everybody quickly gathered it in the palms of their hands and smeared their bodies with it like holy anointment. The carcase was then washed with boiling water and scraped clean with dhaus, and then put on the fire without bothering to remove its insides. When the skin charred and split four men carried it on a stake to the hut's entrance where it was hacked into strips, and the meat distributed among the guests.

I thought there would be some ceremonies attached to a Burrah Din but I discovered there were none, Mehmood Ali assuring me that the celebrations consisted mainly of revel-

ling. "There's a bit of a ritual that goes with it," he said, "but we won't be able to see it, it's all done inside the hut. The dead man's bones are exhumed from their temporary grave on the first day and the family members take turns to cradle them in their arms. On the third day they are reburied in the family grave and a cross is raised over the spot. The last item is to give every guest a piece of cloth, and then the celebration concludes."

"So there is nothing to a Burrah Din except carousing?" I observed.

"Oh, there is significance attached to the event all right. The man who throws the party is recognized as the next head of the house. In Jansin it is Chakru. You want to meet him?"

Mehmood Ali called Chakru over. He, a young man dressed in a red cummerbund and lots of shell necklaces, came uncertainly to us, smelling heavily of toddy.

"Ah! Mehmood Ali," he said, recognizing. "When did you arrive?"

"A little while ago. We came to see your Burrah Din. What's going to happen next?"

"We are going to fetch some pigs."

"When do you plan to hold your sports? My friend would like to take pictures?"

"We will hold them now if you like."

Chakru called the guests together. They looked a dazzling array of clothes and decorations, these Nicobaris knew how to bedeck themselves. At Chakru's behest two young men stepped into the open and gave a fencing display with sticks covered with red and white cloth. Unfortunately I had to call a halt to the proceedings because clouds came over and I felt the light was not strong enough for colour photography.

"Let's hold them later when the sky clears," I suggested.

Chakru agreed. "Meanwhile we will go and fetch the pigs."

Clouds continued to roll over all that day but in the afternoon there were a few bright intervals and I made the most of it. The stick fencing was resumed, but after a few passes had to be given up because one of the contestants sprained his ankle. Subsequent to that came dancing—men and women

formed a circle, held hands, and singing went round and round stamping their feet. The music they danced to was vocal, not even a drum was beaten to keep time. To my ears it sounded dull.

The last event was the canoe race, the decorated canoes being used for the purpose. Launched in the bay they looked picturesque as the festoons and buntings blew gaily in the breeze. I was surprised, however, at the spectators' indifference; no one clapped, no one shouted encouragement, actually everybody seemed relieved when the race was over. Then there was a rush back to the hut where bottles of toddy were drunk and hunks of pork eaten. The whole celebration appeared disappointingly tame.

From Jansin we were to proceed to Kapanga where Moosaji—who had gone back with the *Daya* from West Katchall—promised to send a launch to pick us up the following afternoon. Our original plan was to do the seventeen-mile journey on foot, but before she left Rani Changa had instructed Chakru to send us by a canoe instead, since the footpath lay over hilly terrain and the jungle was infested with pythons.

The canoe—one of the two craft that had taken part in the race, except that it had been stripped of its decorations—was launched at five o'clock in the morning to catch the ebb. All the guests participated in the effort, wading in waist-deep water to put us beyond the pale of the breakers. After several fretful attempts we were afloat at last and the rowers did some spirited paddling to get beyond the reef. Our progress thereafter was steady but slow, very slow, for for five rowers there were only three oars, and one of these was used by the coxswain, incidentally a one-handed man, for steering. Furthermore the crew had not yet fully shaken off the effects of their overnight carousal and often dozed off. Only when the big swells came—and they were some swells—would the coxswain wake up and shout "Halsi" at which the rowers would sit up and paddle frantically. Frankly, my mind was full of misgivings about this journey, it seemed a mad venture to be going twenty miles over an open ocean in a frail canoe and that manned by a partially inebriated crew.

We rowed and rowed until we were two miles from the

shore and then veered right. The canoe rose and dipped, rose and dipped in those mountainous swells as if we were in a ferris wheel. To worsen the situation clouds blew over and the wind became sharp. But that made no difference to the rowers who alternately paddled and slept. Somehow we managed to make it to Jula which was just a place name with no huts, where we beached and recovered another oar stowed away under a bush.

With the addition of the new oar our progress became somewhat rapid but the sea continued to be restless. Then a flight of pigeons came over from the direction of Bampoka Island ten miles to our east. The coxswain aimed his good hand at it and said, "That's a sure sign rain is coming." Whether that remark was intended to inform or frighten us, I do not know, but both Mehmood Ali and I agreed that footing it to Kapanga through the python-infested forest would have been safer.

Then came the last straw: out of the heaving ocean a school of dolphins arose. They showed themselves some hundred yards to our left and gave such an attractive display of acrobatics, leaping out of the water in a line, that our rowers spent all their time watching them. Flattered by their attention the fish moved nearer, about twenty feet from the canoe, where they entertained us to another, a more spectacular turn, shot straight out of the water dropping back on the same spot like performing elephants. The rowers now put down their oars and laughed and laughed. Mehmood Ali, who was sitting behind me, leaned forward to whisper, "When dolphins accompany your boat it means you are safe. Sailors regard them as good omen." It seemed there was some truth in that, for some time after the school left we saw the clouds burst into rain some two miles behind us. Had we been caught in that downpour we surely would have drowned.

A pleasant sun now shone but the wind and the swells were still troublesome. The canoe was dancing drunkenly and only the outrigger saved us from capsizing. Gradually we steered close to the shore, but here a new danger arose, the sea was full of coral rocks which rose practically to the surface.

The sight of the rocks shook up our crew, and for the next

two miles they did a marvellous feat of sculling. They would take the big waves head on until their force was spent, and in the brief lulls that followed paddled adroitly through the narrow channels in that coral labyrinth. A slight misjudgment of steering or oaring and the canoe would have been holed.

Half-way we spied a canoe coming from the opposite direction, a dog on shore running with it, barking phrenetically. We wondered why the canine was in such a state until the canoe came near. There in the lap of the coxswain was a little puppy apparently being taken to its new home and the bitch did not want to be parted from it. Round a wooded promontory and we were in sight of Kapanga. How thankful we were that the hazardous journey which had taken us full eight hours was over at last!

The launch *Sarda* arrived soon after we had finished lunch in the Company's local canteen and by early evening we were back in Nancowry.

With the rapid approach of the monsoon season there was only one more provisioning trip to be made, to Teresa Island, thirty miles to the north of Nancowry. "On the way we will also take in Choura," Moosaji told me. "It is an interesting place and you must not go back without seeing it." Mehmood Ali and the Revenue Officer Riasuddin joined us on that trip.

The *Daya* sailed into Choura waters at daybreak and dropped anchor scarcely a hundred feet from shore, for the sea around that island drops a sheer ten thousand feet. Seeing us a canoe on the beach filled up with men and came paddling to the *Daya*. Lalouka, Choura's head-captain, clambered up on deck and asked Moosaji, "Have you heard of one of our canoes that went to Car Nicobar last week? It hasn't returned yet. We are worried."

One could appreciate the man's anxiety for Choura waters are treacherous, full of currents, and for a canoe to be gone that long could be a matter of concern.

"We don't know," Moosaji told the man. "We are coming from Nancowry."

"Then please send a wireless message to Car Nicobar."

Moosaji said that the *Daya* was not fitted with wireless.

"In that case take us back to Nancowry. We will send a message from there."

"My dear fellow, we have just arrived, and you want us to go back immediately," Moosaji protested.

At that remark the man became apologetic. "Oh, no, no. Come along and rest on our island for a bit."

We went over in their canoe. Choura is a banjo-shaped island, a low round hill forming its base. The local population keep well away from this hill because they believe evil spirits dwell on it. The villages are located on the handle part which is a narrow strip a mile long and a few hundred yards wide.

On the beach we came across a peculiar sight. In front of one of the communal beehives, which was the island's death house, was a festooned canoe suspended between two poles, bunches of bananas and wild flowers hanging from it. Underneath it sat six boys and a girl, their eyes red with weeping. "Their father died yesterday," Lalouka told us. "He is now lying in the canoe awaiting burial."

"You know how they will bury the man?" Moosaji said. "They will hang this canoe on a tree and let it stand there until worms eat up the flesh. Then they will float it away in the sea. These Chouras are quite distinct from the other Nicobaris. They have their own way of life."

Unlike in the other islands Choura villages were set far behind the beach, clusters of low huts with water-pots and wood stacks arranged around them to act as walls. In one of them we saw a young man shaping clay balls into vases. He had moulded half a dozen already, and a huge pile of wet clay lay beside him ready to be worked.

"They are an industrious people," said Riasuddin, who knew this island well. "Pottery and canoe-making are their principal crafts. The pots and canoes that you see in the Nicobars are made by them."

We crossed a fence and found ourselves in the next village, the inhabited portion of the island being small the villages were situated close to one another. I noticed that everyone was busy doing something, men, women, even children, which

was in such sharp contrast to the general atmosphere of indolence one came across in the other islands.

"The Chouras must work hard for their living, their island is barren," Riasuddin went on. "Do you know for their pottery and canoe-making they have to fetch the clay and the timber all the way from Teressa because their own are no good? No other Nicobaris would put themselves to so much trouble."

"If they are craftsmen how do they find time to become labourers?"

"When the demand for their articles slackens they go to the other islands to work. Mostly they are employed in the gardens to pick coconuts."

We were passing from village to village in rapid succession, wending our way through knots of people. They looked happy and smiled at us, but I found that a large number of the inhabitants suffered from filaria.

"Why doesn't the Medical Department do something about this?" I said, pointing to a woman with elephantine legs.

"They are doing what they can. But unless we establish a hospital here we won't be able to do much," Riasuddin said.

"Well, establish a hospital then. You get funds from the Government of India for such projects."

"The difficulty is water. There is no water on this island. It has to be fetched from Teressa."

From behind a straggling bush an oldish man wearing a pair of torn shorts and a holed hat emerged. He stood, arms akimbo, and called out, "Mehmood, oh, Mehmood."

Mehmood Ali greeted the fellow like an old friend. "Lifat!" he exclaimed joyously. Then dragging the man towards us, he said, "You know who he is? The only murderer the Nicobars have produced. He killed the local witch doctor for making false prophecies. I had the honour to arrest him with his three accomplices."

Lifat grinned broadly at the introduction.

"How is it he has not been hanged yet?" I bantered.

"The Administration did put them on trial in Port Blair but on second thoughts decided to let them off; the judge said these tribals could not be expected to know the Indian law.

And besides, the Choura dastur does permit the killing of false witch doctors." Turning to the old man, Mehmood Ali asked, "Well, Lifat, and have you murdered any more witch doctors?"

With a straight face the fellow replied, "How can I, Mehmood? Now the dastur has changed."

Lifat looked quite a character. From hereon he attached himself to us as our guide and philosopher. Mind you, in that small place there was nothing left to see, so that his services seemed superfluous, nonetheless in some respects he did prove useful. For instance when Moosaji said that we would like to witness a Choura dance he at once set about gathering people, cajoling them to put aside their work and perform for our benefit. He also helped me with my photography by yanking men and women out and arranging everything. He enjoyed nothing more, however, than when Moosaji told him I wanted to buy some Choura pots to take back with me as souvenirs, and if he could arrange the deal.

"That's easily done," he muttered, waddling up to a young man who was making them. After a brief confabulation he fetched the fellow, holding two pots in his hand.

"These are the only ones he has for sale," Lifat said, adding gravely, "And he wants two fathoms of cloth for it."

We were not in the mood to haggle so agreed to the price. At once the goods changed hands, the potter reaching his hut in two big bounds where he set to measuring the cloth by stretching it between the tips of fingers and the tip of his nose. Immediately afterwards his wife joined him and the pair sat in a huddle over the new acquisition.

"They are happy," Lifat said benignly, watching them. "I always do good to people."

"What is your cut from it?" Mehmood Ali demanded.

"Nothing," protested the old scoundrel.

"Ah! Come clean. Will you ever transact a sale without getting your cut? What is it?"

"All right, Mehmood. I will tell you. You are an old friend. A bottle of toddy."

And the fellow waddled up to the hut and drank a full bottle of toddy, licking his lips with relish.

At midday we sailed from Choura reaching Teresa before sunset, just in time to watch the pigs feeding. In the small village beside the Company's canteen a woman was breaking open coconuts with a dhau and pouring the water and soft kernel into a trough made out of a hollowed-out coconut trunk. And the pigs, big and small, were grunting, squealing, fighting, to get at the copra, eating the stuff voraciously and noisily—well, just like pigs.

Teresa is a large island with a population of only seven hundred and should be good for timber and coconut extraction considering it has a well-wooded hill and good soil. But the people here seemed to be lazier than in other islands, with the result Chouras exploited them unscrupulously. They not only stole their timber and clay, they charged them an annual tax for doing so, and the islanders meekly paid up believing the Chouras would do witch-craft otherwise. Here the hair-style was different, the men wore long hair and the women cropped it short. "And as for marriage," Moosaji said, "they must have experience of at least a dozen suitors before the village council agrees to marry them."

Back in Nancowry the police wireless flashed a warning that a cyclone was coming our way. That cyclone took two days to pass, and immediately afterwards came instructions from Cassim to bring the *Daya* along to Car Nicobar with all the available stocks of copra in view of the monsoon's imminence. So one afternoon I took leave of my friends at Nancowry, and sailed.

We reached Car Nicobar under a heavily laden sky, and the wind was sharp and moist indicating that monsoon was near at hand. I was anxious to spend a few days with Cassim who had done so much for me, but he advised me to take the *Safeena* which was due to sail for Port Blair that afternoon since there was no certainty now how the weather would behave.

And it was a good thing I took his advice, for hardly did we round Ross Island and enter Port Blair bay than the full fury of the monsoon broke out compelling us to disembark in pelting rain.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SUNSET

A HUNDRED and sixty inches of rain is some water to pour upon a land, and yet the Andaman soil soaks up every bit of it; there is not a river nor a lake in the archipelago. Since my return from the Nicobars it had rained every day, for two days without cessation, confining me most of the time to our bungalow.

The rain brought new life to earth—everywhere on land it was green, green, green, but the sea and the sky had turned a dark, misty grey. Often there was thunder and lightning followed by gales that bent trees and made the sea heave like an angry giant. The Andamans were no longer fit to travel in. I booked my passage home by M.V. *Nicobar* which was due to sail in a fortnight.

I spent a couple of days with my friend Mattu, the Divisional Forest Officer of Wimberlygunj. It is a small town on the other side of the bay and I went there first by ferry to Bamboo Flats, thence seven miles by the Forest Department's truck. The clouds lay low on the road and we had to plough through them.

At Mattu's I had a peculiar experience. At breakfast my vision became unsteady, I felt as if the world was like a cinema show in which the projector speed has slackened. "That is funny," I said. "I have never had anything wrong with my eyes before."

I tottered to the settee, lay down and closed my eyes. After a rest they felt better.

Mattu and his wife were alarmed. "You had better see the doctor," they advised.

I agreed. One can overtax one's heart.

The doctor at the Wimberlygunj hospital gave me a thorough check up. "Your pulse is healthy, and the bonding is perfect," he said, puzzled. Then quizzically, "Is this your first visit to the islands?"

I said it was.

"That must be the reason," he said. "In the rainy season humidity becomes intense here. That is what has affected you. Otherwise you are perfectly fit."

The following day I went with Mattu to the forests. We rode in a tow boat passing miles and miles of log rafts rattling on the creek's swollen waters.

A big patch of forest was being cleared where we alighted. We arrived just in time to watch a giant gurun crash to the ground. How the axemen and labourers ran away from it!

"We intend to regenerate this area," Mattu said surveying the scene. "In place of the indigenous trees we plan to plant teak. That's a much better commercial proposition. To begin with we propose to regenerate two thousand acres. If they succeed we will plant more."

The forest was full of birds. They seemed to be happy the rains had come. A gaudy parrot in a padauk held a long conversation with a fellow parrot on another. A jungly mynah on a bare silk cotton branch preened her feathers in pouring rain. Even the morose herons looked jolly as they waded across muddy fields.

The rest did me good. Back in Port Blair I set about taking leave of friends, which proved to be a long-drawn-out task for I found that the entire town had befriended me. Everywhere I had to drink Andaman's bitter brew of tea.

M.V. *Nicobar* arrived, docked, unloaded, loaded. One afternoon I was on her deck, pressing against the rail, bantering with friends on the jetty who had come to say good-bye. The siren went, the hawsers were unfastened, and the big boat sidled into the bay. Round Ross Island we entered the open sea, and there was Andaman's marigold sun setting peacefully over the Rangachang hill.

THE END



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